THE YOUTH QUESTION IN BIG FLAME

(1) THE TERMS OF THE DEBATE

There are two distinct political lines on the question of youth and education in BP. It is not youth versus teachers, as both 'sides' have their older and younger supporters. The age of the people is a red herring. Some have attacked the youth group because of its relatively elderly advisers. The ripe old age of 24 or whatever does not determine correctness; neither contrary to what some in BP think does practice (even with quotes from Mao) — what determines it is correct political analysis; tested ultimately in struggle. This document will try to show that the Youth Group as they call themselves (in particular BP of ERF and TH of Leeds) has an entirely mistaken political analysis which is harming BP's ability to understand the questions and therefore construct a good practice. The existence of 'two lines' is particularly serious in this case as they directly clash in practice (ie. over the cuts and strategies to deal with the current educational crisis) and could prove seriously embarrassing. The Youth Group's political mistakes can be characterised as:

(a) Moralism: There is not attempt to provide a concrete, scientific-materialist analysis of youth or education, only moral exhortations about oppression. The consequence is:

(b) Ideologism: The political line is abstract and not connected to actual current events in this historical conjuncture (the cuts, crisis in education etc). For instance there is not attempt to explain why there is no widespread pupils' movement either historically or at the moment.

(c) Ultra-Leftism: Not only in relation to the possibilities of action with teachers, but they don't even understand where radical school-students are at. This means that when some of us have criticised the Youth Group's (YG) notion of autonomy, that it can't be reduced as some do, to the 'youthfulness' of the analysis and experimentation alone.

A final point. The teachers have been accused of ignoring the debate and been unconcerned with the needs of youth. Instead we have been concentrating on our pamphlet, which breaks from left tradition precisely in that it centres much of the analysis on the position and needs of school-students. While the pamphlet does not deal with the whole position of youth, we stand by its complete, if its analysis of youth and education and we ask comrades to read the pamphlet in the light of some of the accusations by the YG. I'd just like to mention a few of the things that we say in relation to school-students. We have been accused of ignoring the power of teachers over students. On page 6 we refer to the 'hierarchical relationships between teachers and pupils.' We say 'Earlier on kids learn that teachers are powerful, and to get on you have to please the teacher and take orders.' There is more on page 7. We don't see easy alliances — on page 13 we say 'It would be wrong to see teachers simply as workers, automatically on the same side as pupils.' The teacher plays a partly-repressive role in passing on the ideology which binds this class divided society together, and in terms of their authoritarian role in the classroom. We have a whole section (Page 16-17) on 'The effect of the crisis on the pupils.' We situate pupil rebellion in its historical and materialist context, rather than in a simple unchanging reaction to authority as the YG does. Neither do we call (as we have also been accused, showing that our work has simply not been read) for 'more education' as the solution to the crisis. In fact we make the point that such a perspective cannot possibly mobilise pupils who are 'so fed up with the experience of school that they don't give too much thought to the bad conditions.' (P. 27). We are however in favour of fighting for change and reforms in education, which b the YG appear to reject... a point we return to later.

In the following material we will be referring to the YG articles:

(i) "An anti-report on the education commission report." (BP/ERF)
(ii) "Some last minute notes on the school question." (TH/Leeds
(iii) "A Reply to Leeds' teachers criticisms." (BP/ERF)
(iv) "The power of youth, or whent is a revolutionary not a revolutionary?" (TH/Leeds)
(2) ANALYSIS CANNOT BE MADE ON THE BASIS OF FALSE PARALLELS.

The YG have compared the relationships between teachers and pupils to -
foremen and workers, men and women, black and white, homosexual and hetero-sexual.
and even the British army and the Catholic masses in Northern Ireland. This has
been done to justify the essential correctness of any struggle of youth, to
confirm the repressive role of the teacher and to write off any activity
among teachers, even to the point of comparing the appearance of a
Conference resolution from the Liverpool Teachers Group to one from a
supposed 'Halewood Foremen' Group (see YG document ii.).

Comparisons of this kind can make clever points and certainly establishes the
good guys and the bad guys; a necessary procedure in YG to win the emotional
support even the most politically untenable position can generate if it
makes the right noises. Unfortunately the comparisons are usually
useless and harmful, precisely because they fail to pinpoint the
specific conditions in which social relations arise (including the oppressive
role teachers play). It is remarkable that the YG has totally failed
to give any analysis and definition not only of the educational crisis, but
even of the general role of education in capitalist society. Instead they
have relied on the foremen analogy. This analogy implies that the teacher
like the foreman is caught between class forces and is forced to take an
authoritarian role. But the situation is qualitatively different. The foreman
does not have a contradictory class position; he is unambiguously the final
chain in the capitalist command, whose function is to guarantee the continuity
of production. He may face counter-pressure from the shop floor, but there is
no ambiguity; he is the boss's man. The teacher is not in such a position.
The function of education is not production, but re-production of the conditions
of production. That is to re-produce the class hierarchy in society and to
socialise the future workforce to the degree required for their future
positions. But the whole point about this is that it is a contradictory
process. Like all elements of the superstructure, the education system is
relatively autonomous from the capitalist economy. Unlike production,
re-production cannot be directly controlled, partially because it has a strong
ideological component. That education is not simply a straight capitalist
process of child-minding and brainwashing can be seen by the recent state
and right-wing attacks on progressive education, comprehensives and radical
teachers. Teachers are one of the means by which the function of education
in capitalist society is carried out. This undoubtedly involves social
relations of authority and ideology that are anti-working class. But it would
be wrong to over-exaggerate this. The recent conflicts in education (Tyndale
etc.) show the considerable degree of space there is for radical and progressive
teachers to both - work against authoritarian relationships with pupils and to
present a counter-ideology. While not pretending this is easy, it can be done
and it is our job to see it generalised and systematised. There is a socialist
strategy for teachers, there is none for foreman - the difference lies in
the distinction between production and re-production. All strategies based on
analyses between schools and factories are wrong. The YG is merely an ultra-
left face of a long running error. The IS group base their teachers' work
on a shop-floor analogy, only here teachers are the unambiguous good guys -
workers, fighting a trade union struggle. Consequently they ignore the
oppressive relations and ideological role the teacher plays. Their are many
other variations; their common feature is an under-estimation of the
ideological function of education. Hence they all under-estimate the real
space and basis for much radical action by teachers. The YG by using the
factory-foreman analogy concentrate solely on authority relations, which
although one aspect of education, results in them not grasping the basic
function of education in capitalism and therefore failing to produce a correct
strategy. They put a lot of stress on teachers not being able to support
kids because of the fear of losing their jobs. There is obviously some truth
in this, but again should not be over emphasised. The teacher works within
the space available and all radical teachers take risks to support necessary
action. Like all militants in any situation the radical teacher must judge
the circumstances before taking action, but in our pamphlet (page 30) we
outline a number of practical means of help that socialist teachers can
give pupils who are organising.
As for all the other parallels (men and women etc) similar cases could be made out showing that the social relations that arise derive from totally different conditions and therefore political perspectives are of qualitatively distinctive nature. Parallels are the refuge of a poverty-stricken analysis, they function as a substitute for the actual concrete conditions being analyzed and act as a cheap 'vote-catching' exercise. Lacking a concrete analysis the YG can only substitute moralistic advice to teachers on not being oppressive, giving up their jobs and waiting patiently to being over-run by the revolutionary hordes.

(3) BIG PLANE POLITICS IS NOT BUILT ROUND THE "MOST OPRESSED."

To justify working solely round youth/pupils and ignoring teachers the YG states that "our orientation where there are divisions in the class are always to the most oppressed." (YG Document ii) This statement is wrong on two counts. First the relations between youth/pupils and teachers are not primarily "divisions in the class." The YG follow the oldx East London Gp, Power of Women etc in being obsessed with conflicts within the class, not between the classes. Hence in all their documents they blithely ignore the cuts and the current crises in education, which is the current manifestation of class conflict in education. Secondly the concept of structuring political practice around the 'most oppressed' is unsound and anti-marxist. Oppression is a notoriously difficult thing to define, and even if it could be, it would not be the main yardstick for intervention. Has would have some very strange practices if this was our method; again the concept is moralistic. Even if pupils or anyone else could be shown to be the most oppressed of a given sector if the class contradictions were not expressing themselves in struggles of pupils, but rather by ancillary workers or teachers then that is where the revolutionary organisation must be. We cannot enter into interventions on a solely voluntaristic basis and create struggles from nothing. Although of course there is a case for slow and patient, long-term work to build up the potential of an important sector. But the revolutionary criteria for intervention is first of all where the class contradictions are expressing themselves, recognising that they usually follow a long-term pattern. This is why we work with our workers - the location of industry within the economy, the advanced nature of the work process and methods of exploitation, the composition of the workforce - these ensure that they are a potential vanguard and that they will always be somewhere around the centre of class struggle. They are not the most oppressed industrial workers, it's a lousy job, but nothing in comparison with workers in small sweatshops and factories of certain kinds, for example.

In their enthusiasm for being the 'most oppressed' the YG lose sight of reality. In document ii, this states that 'school students have nothing to lose but their chains in the fight against bourgeois education.' Populist rhetorical rubbish. If this is so why isn't there a widespread pupils movement? Just because you are oppressed doesn't mean you have automatic potential for instant struggle. Every group, even those right on the bottom have things to lose by struggling. Some revolutionaries might not think so, but then they have been substituting their desires for reality for a long time. School students are no exception. For instance any pupil knows that exams are the real ticket to future success and rising up the educational ladder (after all this got to university somehow). Even if the ladder and the future job market is rejected and hated, the pupils, especially radical ones are faced with real concrete choices and difficulties about struggling. Like all of us the pupil faces the problem of choosing the ground to struggle at minimum cost to them and their sanity. Let's forget who are the "most oppressed" and get down to studying the actual problems of intervention in education and youth.

(4) ALLIANCES BETWEEN KITTS, TEACHERS AND PARENTS ARE POSSIBLE AND NECESSARY

The first problem of intervention is what to struggle about and how. To start with it's necessary to have a realistic assessment of the balance of forces, to see who can be united against the enemy. But who is the enemy. The YG make the typical ultra-left error of identifying the enemy as
the 'agents' of capitalist oppression. So the IG document states that the fight back of blacks, women, gay, and youths must "inevitably be... directed against" their immediate agents of oppression. So the targets are white, men, hetero-normals and adults (including teachers). This is dangerous nonsense. It is for socialists within these sectors to analyze the basis of exploitation and oppression by capitalism and the state and how it manifests itself in daily life and to draw up strategies to fight it and advance their independent needs. The target and enemy must always be the real origin of oppression. Of course any struggle of this sort must will come up against and if necessary fight against people who are long term allies, but short term agents of oppression. But this must be done in a context of recognizing that they are non-antagonistic contradictions and that points of unity can still be found.

But the YG are blind to this and are against any unity. Their second document states: "there is no possibility of any sort of alliance between parents, teachers and pupils." Why, because "abstract calls for unity fail to recognize the power of adults over kids." But this falls precisely because we are not making abstract calls for unity. It would obviously be wrong and fails to recognize power divisions to call for a permanent alliance between these sectors. But it is not wrong to try and identify issues which provide points of unification and a process of unity in struggle. These are certain struggles in which it is correct to advance the slogan 'black and white unite and fight' (as MK said) while recognizing that it is an inadequate general perspective. So for pupils, teachers and parents - there are issues which united action can take place on eg. the closure of a school, the sacking of a teacher, the victimization of pupils and general cuts and crises issues. The obvious case is the joint action that was taken to get rid of an NF teacher in a big London school by pupils, parents and teachers. Such concrete unity in action is the perspective of the NUSS (National Union of School-Students) and of the Black Parents and Black Students Movement, who work in close cooperation. It has been said that involving pupils in cuts committees is utopian. We do not think so. Of course the pupils would have to be organized in some kind of action group or NUSS branch. Representation already exists in this basis in some areas. It is presumably our policy to encourage some type of formal organization of pupils or do we think only spontaneous action is ideologically correct? Refusal in advance of all forms of principle, as the YG does is abdicating any responsibility for certain aspects of the struggle and is a sectarian blindness.

(5) WE HAVE TO START FROM WHERE YOUTH IS AT

Also part of making a realistic assessment to start interventions is understanding at what level of consciousness, action and organization youth and in this case pupils are at. We are in favour of developing the power of youth, but you can't do it by over-estimating your strengths as the YG does. They have stated that "students are already the Vanguard of this struggle" (against schooling) and have referred to the "amazing potential" of the struggle by pupils. Unfortunately the evidence is not so convincing. The examples given by the IG document include - crusade, anti-recruitment leaflets, repression of CMA, the Little Red Schoolbook and "increasing attempts of arson on school buildings." This pot-
hotch-potch has at its heart a confusion of spontaneous action, usually of deorganized and individualistic nature, with conscious and organized activity - that which often results from a schools movement. Such spontaneous action is part of the rebellion of youth and is the raw material on which something organized and conscious can be built on, but it is not a substitute for it, or for an analysis of why there isn't a real schools movement. An interesting difference emerged when DC (who is a teacher and supporter of the politics of the youth group) wrote in a draft of part of the education pamphlet - "A lot of the power has to be taken from us, it is for the students to declare we are on their side." We rejected this because it was abstract and didn't deal with how power could be taken - it could lead to teachers making absurd tactical errors or altering power relations. We changed it to read - "we welcome the fact that those students, when organized, will demand that even teachers, give up our power to them."
A vanguard has to be conscious and organised, as some of it is through NUSS. The politics of the YG will make it difficult to construct a youth vanguard in education. Not only because they over-estimate the consciousness and organisation of pupils but also because they mis-interpret it badly. They say (Doc 11) that "The struggle of youth is not for a good education, not for a socialist education, not for lofty teachers, it is a struggle against education." Document 1 states "reforms like campaigning for money only prop up a rotten system." This is likely to alienate them from schools' activists and potential activists who want to fight for change and a better education. It is only likely to appeal to the unorganisable, whose occasional anarchistic combative activity can often be misleading. This seems a deliberate intent of the YG who state (Doc 11) that the means of developing the power of school-students is "in the short-term, playing the hop from school, pleasing teachers (especially lefties) around, not listening etc."

Even when the teacher is a good socialist." This pathetic anti-education perspective is reinforced by the deliberate mis-spellings they insist of foisting on us in their propaganda. They misuse the already inadequate "more money less work" concept to define their perspective as "more money and independence - less school."

Do school-students really want less school and education? If so they join with the government, the state and the ruling class. As usual anarchism and extreme-leftism converges with the bourgeoisie. We are convinced that most school-students want to transform education and want the kind of knowledge that will help them control their lives. This perspective is absolutely necessary when the state and the ruling class are trying to restructure the content of education to make it directly serve the needs of capital - thus reducing the little power, choice and control pupils and teachers have at the moment. As we say in our pamphlet:-

A structured and disciplined approach to learning, incorporating pupil self-discovery is necessary to those who will have to fight exploitation and oppression at work and at home, they need the skills and knowhow to understand that situation.

We believe that socialist teachers have a role to play in that and other positive strategies for change in education. We do not believe as the YG does (Doc 1, page 2) that progressivism is the limit of what teachers can do. Our task, together with pupils is as Chris Searle (Ironically a teacher of TH) puts it:-

to create within education a branch of the apparatus of liberation for the oppressed of the world.

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