

BIG BLAME

marsevside's rank and file newspaper

DISCUSSION PAPER ON ORGANISATION

written collectively by MD, PS, CD, ND, HW and MY for
the organisation meeting on Thursday 25 November 1971

introduction: We think this meeting on organisation is fundamental for the political growth of the group and, at the same time, necessary because we are experiencing a crucial turning point in our activities. We must therefore critically consider the past and try to have a fairly clear idea of the future: in order to do so we need to see our day to day organisation inside a general idea of what kind of organisation we are. This document has to be seen as an attempt to contribute to this discussion, which should draw a few clear lines, agreed by everybody in the group, and which should be the basis of our theory and practice from now on.

the start of big flame: The first concept we want to put into question is the concept of external vanguard (defined later). BF started from the subjective initiative of some individuals who were agreed on a few political points and wanted to act on this basis to provide information, and to link up sections of the working class. Was that an external vanguard? Even if it might seem so, it wasn't. Just because BF never considered itself as the very small embryo of the Party. But, on the contrary, as a group of militants who always tended to work towards the building of a revolutionary organisation at the service of the development of forms of consciousness, struggle and organisation of the working class.

At the same time BF always tended to generalise the highest points reached by the most advanced sectors of the working class, in objectives and forms of struggle, or the content of exemplary struggles - like Pilkingtons - always starting from the day to day contradictions lived by the workers, which is also the content of capitalist society: wages and division of labour. We can say then that, not physically but politically, BF has always been inside the working class.

four phases: We can divide BF history into 4 phases, which go along very well with the development of class struggle towards the political autonomy of the working class. The first phase in which the idea of producing a newspaper was born and the contacts on which to base it were established, reflected the May 68 events, the student movement in this country, and the long tradition of working class militancy in this area without the hegemony of any political party. The role of the trade unions and the Communist Party, the possibilities of revolution in advanced capitalism - for revolutionaries, the May Events made things clearer and strengthened beliefs; for some workers, new ideas were implanted.

second phase: The second phase, that of the newspaper, reflected the needs of the working class to break out of its isolation and fragmentation to which it is confined by capitalism. The paper was mostly informational. The fact that it sold so well shows how this need was felt by the workers. They

wanted to know about other struggles, and tell others about their own. The workers saw in the paper a means of doing this and Big Flame became a reference point: it still surprises us the number of phone calls and letters we received because of that paper.

During the paper's life Pilkingtons exploded. Everybody understands now that this was a turning point. The rebellion against the GMU was a temporary break out towards class autonomy which took place against the background of Labour's attempt to control the working class by In Place of Strife and the previous year's Ford Penal Clauses strike. The Big Flame paper spread information and attempted a political analysis of the Pilkington strike. BF militants for the first time found themselves involved in a specific struggle, and a lot of what Merseyside workers know about the strike came through the paper. An example of the close collaboration between Big Flame and the strike leaders was the broadsheet produced and distributed collectively in St Helens on the day of protest against the sackings.

The Pilkington workers were fighting for their autonomy and for the first time they showed that the Unions are one of the most important instruments used by capitalism to encage this autonomy. They were desperately struggling for an alternative, and all they did was to build another union. And that was the end of their struggle, and the end of the paper for it was clear now that something more than a newspaper was needed. Incidentally, it was the first and last time that we would support the idea of a breakaway union, rather than a political organisation of the working class.

Something more than an information sheet was needed at a time when a new kind of militancy was searching about for alternatives in an at times confused or unconscious way. In June 1970 this upsurge was heightened by the election of an unusually reactionary Tory Government faced by a severe economic crisis. It was necessary to point out the role of the Unions and to take part in the debate over the alternatives, which sectors of the working class were beginning to get involved in.

Some of the comrades involved with the paper who first realised this put it in this way: "We need to put our politics in the paper". They thought there was an irreconcilable difference between them and the others; they failed to see the continuity between the phase that was starting and the one just ended - and they made their choice, the Party.

The rest of Big Flame decided that in order to deal with the tasks we faced, we needed to work as a stimulant. We tried unsuccessfully to set up a Merseyside Rank and File Movement - a heterogeneous collection of militants seen as a defensive force against the ruling class assault. We saw this as an area for our politics, but it failed because neither we nor this group of mainly stewards and convenors could provide an urgent and necessary basis for uniting.

We needed to root ourselves in specific struggles and only starting from there could we clarify ourselves and make a contribution to the development of forms of consciousness, struggle and organisation which would lead in the direction of working class autonomy. Our ideas which developed rapidly through our involvement in the Pilkington strike, and grew through the Fords Parity strike, the John Millon strike at Halewood, the Postal strike and the general struggle of the working class, especially on Merseyside, against the Industrial Relations Bill, showed our choice to have been justified.

Our experience in the John Dillon strike taught us the need to be involved in the day to day struggles as well as in the more dramatic times, and it taught us the virtue of consistency.

phase four: The fourth phase began about two months' ago and now we need this discussion on organisation. So far, in a very confused way and possibly instinctively, we've always rejected the traditional leninist concept of the Party. Most of us have refused to join IC which among the leninist organisations is, at the present, the one with the biggest influence in the working class.

Was that because we didn't distinguish between the vanguard and the mass? And do we believe just in spontaneous mass self-organisation, denying any role to a vanguard? The answer is NO!

leninism: But this is the heart of the problem: how we define the concept, Vanguard. For Lenin, revolutionary consciousness comes from the synthesis of the economic struggle of the working class (in itself trade unionist, inside the system) and marxist intellectuals - who betrayed the class they belonged to, the bourgeoisie. The working class receive revolutionary consciousness from the 'outside', ie 'from outside the economic struggle', from outside the sphere of the relationship between workers and bosses.

It is the Party, the organisation of the revolutionaries possessing the instrument of analysis, of marxist science, which embodies the revolutionary consciousness of the proletariat. If we accepted this leninist definition today, we would not correctly answer the problems we confront. Accepting the leninist definition of the workers' 'spontaneous' struggle as just trade unionist, economic, would lead us to see our relationship with the class in terms of ideological conquest and of introduction from the outside of political consciousness. On the contrary, we say that the spontaneous workers' struggle is not limited to the clash of one isolated group of workers and their employer: rather, this activity is a political challenge to the domination of capitalist organisation and ideology. This is proved by the increasing inability of the trade unions to limit struggles in Britain - and especially France and Italy - to purely economic demands. So we can say that political consciousness is not outside the masses.

the vanguard: What then do we mean by the vanguard. Firstly, we must counterpose it to the Leninist concept, which hinges on the ideological/theoretical 'level of development' of the worker. Our emphasis, on the other hand, is on activity in struggle. At Dalewood, we have the experience of the 'ideologically prepared' worker who backs away from the fight, and the militant who gains a generalising understanding through the struggle. The capacity to lead a struggle and to learn from it, is the characteristic of the vanguard. Moreover,

examples like Pilkingtons show the inadequacy of theories which talk about advanced sectors in certain areas of industry. The key is subjective experience in struggle.

At the same time the Leninist definition of the intellectual as 'the educated representative of the ruling class' can't be accepted any more because of the changes which have happened in the class structure of capitalism. The students are a typical example of this: and in fact we reject the idea that the students when they want to make a revolution are bourgeois intellectuals who betray their class.

All this means that if it is true that 'without revolutionary theory there can't be revolution', it is not true any more, if it ever was that there is a theory which can come in from outside to penetrate the masses, but on the contrary that there is a theory as a systematic and generalising knowledge of the needs of the masses - which grows inside the struggle of the working class.

Nor can we forget that the Leninist concept of vanguard has justified all sorts of licence in the relationship between mass and vanguard, and the problem is not in the formal controls which the masses may appear to have over the vanguard but in the very nature of the relationship which links them.

We therefore reject the theory which sees the mass/vanguard relationship in terms: workers struggle (economic); economic organisation of the workers (trade unions); control by the party (external consciousness); over the economic organisation. Only a relationship which starts from the mass politisation and organisation and grows through a growth and linking up of the mass and the vanguard can be successful.

All this is linked not only to the needs of the development of base democracy, but to objective needs too; the revolution no longer should be seen as the solution of a directive from above, of the economic catastrophe of capitalism, but as the growth of the political clash between capital and workers. The prospect is no longer the insurrection, but the armed protracted war in the Western capitalist countries too.

A further word on economic and political struggles:
We see no real distinction between these two ideas. A wage demand is ultimately a threat to capitalism as a one day strike against unemployment. For example, the phenomenon of 'wage-drift' since the second world war has played a major part in eroding the profits of capitalism.

So far we may have appeared to under-emphasise the importance of objective conditions in determining the revolution. We recognise that certain periods of history e.g. post WW1 provide more favourable conditions for a revolutionary situation than others. However, it is 'the subjective condition' of the working class which is always paramount thus at present the disillusionment with the trade unions (pro capitalist in ideology) is of vital importance, for it is only this kind of autonomy which can produce a revolutionary attitude in struggle. It is as a reaction to this that we must understand In Place of Strife and the ILM. The behaviour of certain key groups of shop stewards in vital industries negotiating on a factory level (i.e. thus with a distinct interest from the TU's, who usually must negotiate on a wider level) was of tremendous importance in increasing wage levels (by wage-drift etc) and furthermore causing widespread disruption, such that the bosses and the govt. were forced to counter attack.

The Leninist groups: All of the so-called Leninist groups accept dogmatically Lenin's concept of organisation, without taking into consideration the changed historical conditions. They all say: 'without revolutionary party, no revolution' from which follows: 'lets make the party, then we'll think of the revolution'. In practice their agitation and propaganda a

is only towards the ultimate goal: 'to build the party'.

It is their contempt of the spontaneous struggles of the working class, their inability to understand the ruthless, unpredictable, unevenly developing character of the movements of the masses which characterises all of them. It's their absurd division between economics and politics which makes them label all the struggles of the working class which lack the leadership of the party as 'trade unionist'.

The French student leader Sauvageot during May '68 thought that it was enough to have a party which directed one of those marches towards the Champs Elysees in order to seize power; our Leninist friends in the same way wonder why after a revolutionary demonstration of 35,000 in Milan that it didn't think seizing power. All the Leninist groups or parties have this in common, whether Trotskyist or Maoist. Anyway, we won't mention the Maoists because of their irrelevancy in Britain. Just one thing about them: their interpretation and analysis of Mao is as good as their one of Lenin, that is to say they have understood nothing.

As far as the Trots. are concerned it would be worthwhile ~~xxx~~ examining what historically Trotskyism has meant to the workers movement and to analyse the differences between the three main groups but we don't have the time here. The main thing is that all three groups - SLL, IMG, IS, - think of the revolution still in terms of insurrection, in terms of the quick economic catastrophe of capitalism; that's why they all await the crisis which will be the end of the bosses, without ever considering that this crisis will only happen through the working class offensive and it will only be the first phase of a protracted war. They see the party like the Bolsheviks in 1917, leading the masses against the Winter Palace. That's why they don't foresee in the revolutionary process any intermediate phase in which the working class, after having seized the factories and perhaps the working class areas, defend them from the repression of the bourgeoisie before finally going on to the offensive. For all of them it is the party which makes the revolution, for us it is the proletariat. For all of them the new man will be born after their seizure of power, for us the new men and women are born today, in the daily revolutionary struggle for socialism.

Of course we accept that ⁱⁿ the period of armed struggle total democracy will not always be able to operate; if this requires a more centralised structure then that structure will arise. But it will only come from the genuine needs of the mass movement, we cannot centralise something now which does not now exist.

IS: But IS deserves more attention. The first characteristic which emerges from reading Socialist Worker is their opportunism. Their recent position on the Common market is an example. Is it not the case that in a recent conference of theirs Tony Cliff has been applauded by the National Committee after saying that principles are overridden by tactics. The Common market issue is one which has showed us how the working class doesn't care about what goes on in parliament. The com on mkt issue became a gigantic effort to give credibility to the democratic parliamentary system. The Labour party opposed the entry, which when in power, it favoured, appealing to the narrow nationalistic feelings of

some sectors of the working class. But IS were opportunists too because the real alternatives were not yes or no to the EBC as they seemed to state. The real task was to show the working class that any change in their condition would be only within their basic relationship with the bosses and the only way to improve that position is to continue the struggle against the bosses here, linking up with the comrades in the EBC countries. By calling for participation by the working class in the 'great debate' IS has merely given greater credibility to the bourgeois institutions. IS is extra-parliamentary, we are anti-parliamentary.

What is more striking is what we read every week in the 'What we stand for' column of Socialist Worker. 'We fight for rank and file control of the TU's and the regular elections of all the full time officials; for 100% trade unionism and defence of the shop stewards' All this is related to what we were saying before about Lenin's concept of organisation. The separation between economics and politics (which is nothing more than a ~~firm~~ reflection of the same split in bourgeois ideology) justifies the fact, according to IS, that the unions should exist, but should be made more democratic. We think that in the development of capitalism, the unions have progressively integrated into the capitalist structure, and in fact have become one of the most powerful instruments of control over working class autonomy. Their structure as such can't meet the political needs of the workers and in fact serves the political needs of the bosses. But since the Labour party has rendered itself incapable of conducting the political struggle of the working class, the worker has no choice but to take this struggle onto the shop floor. Inevitably, then, there is a clash between him and the union. The efforts of some unions for example the T and G to try and involve itself in 'social' and 'political' issues merely illustrate by their failure the unions' impotence.

That's why most revolutionary militants, even if members of unions, act outside and against both the Labour party and the TU's. Trying to fight for the control of the R and F over the unions, ultimately means trying to integrate the autonomous vanguards into a structure whose only purpose is to mediate the interests of workers with those of the bosses, i.e. to make the workers fight only for those small concessions that the employers are ready and able to give them.

Inside the factory IS say that the workers must develop the economic struggle and put pressure on the unions. Outside the factory, if they are socialists, they join the embryo of the party, IS, and after being ideologised they can go back to give the consciousness to their fellow workers.

This analysis was to continue with an examination of the shop stewards structure, the Libertarian groups, Solidarity, and related topics. However pressures of time made this temporarily impossible. We now go on to examine the tasks and organisation of BIG PLANE.

TASKS: INTERNAL ORGANISATION:

Tasks: To put it simply, our tasks are to link the vanguards to provide the basis for workers to participate in politics together. At the same time, we must build up the vanguards in the base groups.

Workers must take their share of control of BF, the non-worker Big flamers, whose role is to generalise experience, bring together isolated militants etc. must also see that this role is not theirs exclusively. What we do now workers in BF in the future must also do.

Though BF is obviously distinct from the mass, we still see ourselves as part and an expression of that mass. The mass is always the area in which we must direct our politics.

Internal organisation: We see that a key concept in BF thinking is that of 'autonomy'. This idea governs our internal and our external relationships. It means that in a sense it is not possible for BF to do what it wants to do, I.E. work towards the building up of autonomous R&F organisations, and in itself be totally undemocratic or authoritarian. This is not to say that we cannot have problems within the group concerning democracy or unequal distribution of power. We see that the solution to this can only lie in the creation of genuine base groups which can eventually become 'totalities' where a wide range of political experience and development can take place. The members of the base groups would be working together politically all the time, hence they would come to recognise and be able to cope with 'personal' problems, because these problems would affect the working of the group, i.e. they would be political problems. As an example, a base group would see part of its responsibilities in involving, both socially and politically, the wife (or husband) of a worker in the group. By a process of 'criticism, self criticism,' we would be able to work together much more meaningfully, much more closely, and in a more revolutionary and human way.

We have already shown how there is a theoretical opposition to Leninism as regards its methods of operating on the working class. Does that mean that we automatically oppose their internal method of organisation which in a sense reflects their external political theory, i.e. Democratic centralism? (That is to say, broadly speaking, vanguard is to masses as leadership is to rank and file. However, this is an oversimplification, while within the Leninist party a structure exists which allows the R&F some control over its leadership, there is no such relationship between vanguard party and masses). We must oppose democratic centralism for the same reasons that we oppose the false distinction between economics and politics (trade unions and party), i.e. that political ideas are inserted into the economic struggle. We see that revolutionary struggle takes place initially, and is based on, the factory. The working class are capable of political consciousness and we work along side it. Our own organisation must therefore reflect this concept, that is to say, it must facilitate the self development of the working class. This could not be possible if BF had a hierarchical structure, for we could not then have self development.

The theory of consciousness revolutionary consciousness
comes through involvement and
participation in day to day struggle. This is as true for
us as it is for workers. Isolated you can, in a political
sense, know and understand nothing. Involvement and mass
struggle are crucial. The next stage from involvement is
self activity, at this stage rightful control is being exerci-
sed.

To go back to autonomy, at the moment base groups have the
final say, that is, on issues which concern the base group,
its area of operation, the base group must know best. But of
course there are often issues which are the concern of the
whole group e.g. how to organise, which new areas to go into
etc. Here, base groups are subject to general decisions.
What of the position of workers within the base groups?
They must eventually have the final veto on base group action,
simply because they are the most directly responsible members
of the group to the mass of their fellow workers. Moreover
proposals for militant action within the factory coming from
us which they did not agree with would be meaningless.
But in a sense this is to look at the problem in the wrong
way. We do not foresee workers exercising such a veto in the
normal activities of the base group. Were this to happen
with any frequency it would indicate such a large gap between
the internal and the external militants that it would mean
that the base group was not functioning properly. The resolu-
tion of disagreements over strategies and tactics takes place
in the way that we arrive at decisions, which take into
consideration and are a product of the feelings of all the
members of the group.

Perhaps we could try and define a little more closely what is
meant by base groups (= nucleus). Realistically, we must see
that membership of a base group implies some kind of acceptance
of the general theory of BF, it is thus something else from
just the collection of all the contacts. But this of course,
can only come about when there is common discussion within the
base group of outside political topics and theories. The base
group can then provide the focal point (it embodies the
vanguard, hopefully) around which other workers will involve
themselves on specific issues, e.g. MW, speed ups etc.
In this way workers can build up their political knowledge
and experience, and develop their abilities to generalise,
through their involvement in BF. It is vital to understand
that BF has to be the organ which provides the political
education for a large number of its members. Non worker
big flamers often have gained some political experience from
outside, or from reading etc.; this is not the case with
most of the workers we operate with, at least not on the same
scale. We must create a structure whereby the political
experience of all BF members is generalised past their own
base group activity.

Group awareness: Decisions as to how the group operates -
divisions of labour, whether people are
pulling their weight (the criteria being from each according
to his/her resources) - should be decided in the base groups.
It is probably only here that the constructive kind of criti-
cism which may be needed is possible, for it is here that
trust and understanding between people working together can
best develop.

Proposals: The whole thing comes down to the need for collective political (social, human etc.) development, with the base group as units for this. We would like to forward, therefore, a number of proposals for group discussion:-

- 1) That we have weekly meetings which take the form of all the base groups coming together to discuss their experiences and common problems and to make common political decisions. We would see the role of the 'report back' vastly expanded to include analysis and discussion as well as just information.
- 2) Fortnightly meetings where the base groups meet together to discuss a specific topic of general political development.
- 3) Meetings held every two or three weeks of all members of BF to make administrative decisions.
- 4) That there be a small 'committee' of 5 or 6 people, each one responsible for the various tasks that are now handed out on an ad hoc basis, e.g. finance, correspondence. These 'functionaries' would be rotated every other month, with the functions rotating through the base groups. The functionaries would be elected delegates from the base groups.
- 5) That a number of study groups be set up, again on a delegate base group basis, to produce discussion documents which will be the basis for the fortnightly discussion meetings. These documents should first be submitted to base groups so that they can have discussion amongst themselves previous to the general meeting. This is very important, because it will make sure that workers are introduced to ideas and become used to talking about topics outside of their factory situation. This also applies to general BF strategies, e.g. the unemployment march.
- 6) The bulletin should be controlled by a team of delegates elected from the base groups. (We see that throughout this structure delegates would be subject to instant recall; decisions of a meeting would be binding on the relevant people.)
- 7) The allocation of new members to base groups and, if necessary, the moving of current members from base group to base group, should be carried out by a 'committee' composed of delegates from each of the base groups. This committee would base its decisions on (a) the needs of BF as a whole (b) the needs of ~~xxxxx~~ each of the base groups (c) the personal needs and wishes of the individual concerned. The committee would also be concerned with any imbalance of workloads which might arise between the groups and could suggest additional projects and areas of work to be undertaken. This is vital if we are not to get stale; we must always be prepared to deal with and explore new situations and problems, and to make sure our theory is an ongoing process.

7) (cont.) Further, the committee would make sure that new people were informed about base group activity, and introduced to BF theory, organisation, and history.

National and international organisation: To see that this divides up into

three areas:-

- 1) The formation of links with 'like minded' individuals and groups around the country and abroad, and encouraging the setting up of BF-type groups in other places.
- 2) Our relationship with other left wing organisations.....
- 3) The building of contacts between workers in similar situations. ~~xxxxxxxxxx~~ This is the responsibility of the base groups. This could expand, for instance, into us arranging for Ford's Dagenham to be leafleted with an open letter from ~~xxx~~ workers in Ford's Halewood.

How then do we see national organisation? It is difficult at this stage to talk very meaningfully about structures, again it will be determined ~~xxx~~ by the needs of the masses at the ~~xxx~~ time. However, we think we can say, that the BF structure is the same kind of a structure, in terms of relationship of base group to whole, as we would like to see in a national organisation.

How do we go about initiating this? We must circulate material we produce, e.g. things like the final version of this document. Eventually we should be in a position where we can send people to various places to help establish groups like ours. In the short term, it may be worth looking at the possibilities, in say, a years time, of organising a convention of workers and revolutionaries who have some sympathies with our ideas.

Newspaper and bulletin: We see the need for the BF newspaper to eventually reappear on Merseyside. It would be a mass organ generalising our particular struggles and publicising outside issues. This would not replace the Bulletin, rather the latter would increase in importance as a means of establishing and maintaining contacts with the vanguard here on Merseyside and sympathetic militants everywhere.

FINALLY, we would like to summarise those various tasks and groups we have proposed:-

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| *Project groups: | *Study groups: |
| Fund raising | Italy |
| Bulletin | Shop stewards |
| Literature and history | Ireland |
| Newspaper | etc. |
| Allocation of people to base groups. | |
| Functionaries committee | |

*List of functionaries
Treasurer; local contacts; correspondence; literature; printing supplies; co-ordinator of meetings, projects etc.; national and international contacts.

LET A HUNDRED FLOWERS BLOOM, A HUNDRED SCHOOLS
OF THOUGHT CONTEND