

Working in the Welfare State

This contribution is the result of a lot of hard thinking about the relevancy of BF politics in the course of my work and my trade union activity. Hopefully it will be seen as a contribution to maintaining BF as a distinct political current on the left and that in writing about things from a practical point of view it will encourage others to do the same.

That we need to reassess and reassert our traditions is increasingly becoming more obvious. We need to discard what we feel is useless, retaining what is and in so doing make our blend of autonomy, libertarian tinged socialist feminism relevant to the eighties.

Working in welfare services is frustrating. Being simultaneously 'in and against the state' means these frustrations feed on the contradictions and stresses of your job. We seem to be surrounded by poverty, squalor, injustice and oppression yet others do not seem to share your sense of urgency ~~or~~ and anger. Seeing the 'punters' (Billy Bunters!) as they are called trying to build or maintain fairly ordinary lives despite all the forces stacked against them just fuels the frustration.

The management hierarchy stifles your own energy and enthusiasm. Those at the top know this and use a system akin to patronage to control. However, many still wring their hands in frustration because it does not allow them to carry out their 'grand design'. They talk a lot about caring for clients, have an almost naive Fabian approach toward welfarism and are totally non-critical of the hierarchy itself. Rarely do they question the built-in assumptions which many share about the rightness of the institution to be structured in such and such a way.

Those at the top cannot relate to the everyday frustrations and experiences of punters and staff. Not because of some magical quality attached to personal experience which means that it is inaccessible to no-one but the person thinking it, for this would make a nonsense of our socialist understanding of the world. No they cannot understand because of their position within the system and their interests within this system. They relate to institutions and structures rather than experiences of the class. Some are quite content to indulge in ideological opposition while, to a greater or lesser extent, practically reinforcing the status quo. Even I, yes me folks, even I worry about being part of the 'velvet glove on the iron fist' as do a lot of socialists I work with. The battleground for both reactionaries and latter day reformers lies in Committee rooms and Council chambers. Endless points of order and how to fit a 'quart in a pint pot'. They learn how to perform, the strategic interruption here, the subtle piece of manipulation there.

Yet it is very easy to get sucked into this sort of approach. Within eight months of becoming a Steward for the housing department I was one of twelve staff reps supposedly representing combined Branches of nearly 3,000 members in negotiations with the Council. This was in a period when the 'cuts' began to bite and the fightback was fragmented and uneven. Too many of us put our energies into bureaucratic posturing i.e. saying we were not recognising the economic difficulties the authority had but knowing full well that many of our members did. This experience taught me how a Labour Council can mouth opposition to the cuts but actually carry them out, in a more insidious and subtle manner than the Tories themselves, and thus undermine any attempts to build up resistance. Were we better off having a Labour Council? this was the question many of us asked and are still asking.

This experience also taught me how easy it is to get cut off from the very people whose interests you claim to represent. Many of us in the Union who were on the left were also involved in the Halgo Action Group. An SWP dominated but by no means controlled rank and file group within NALGO. They were dominant for a variety of reasons partly because they tended to have a very clear line on most things. At a local level the HIG group collapsed because more and more of us became integrated into the Branch Leadership i.e. control of the Executive. For once the clear line our SWP comrades had deserted them and great arguments about integration ensued. Our usurpation of the Branch Leadership simply underlined an already existing state of isolation from the membership.

This isolation existed because we failed to ~~to~~ challenge the contradictions and narrowness that lay at the heart of our demands and how we raised them. We related too easily to the Branch structure, to the Union as an institution, rather than to the difficulties our members were having. On pay and service condition issues we put up ostensibly radical positions but still within the overall traditional Trade Union approach. We need to regain our imaginations for we cannot indefinitely cry sell out every time we lose a struggle. How can we continue to say this when the 'masses' often vote against us? We desperately need to break out of the straitjacket we find ourselves in and change the nature of our demands and the terrain on which we struggle.

The Housing Department where I work has just undergone a massive reorganisation basically due to the transfer of thousands of properties from the GLC but equally due to the latest trend in local government ... decentralisation. In theory a fine idea but in practice it has meant a consolidation of the hierarchy under the pretence of making it more accessible. To be fair the sort of decentralisation practised so far in Hackney is probably very different to that envisaged by other advocates of decentralisation. Yet in the discussions in Hackney little was said about the devolvement of power, the kind of political and staff structures needed to facilitate such a devolvement and no discussion with the public about what they actually wanted. There was consultation with people prior to the elections when the Manifesto was being drawn up but within 15 days of being elected the new leftward leaning Council changed the entire political Committee structure of the Council. They did this with little or no involvement outside of the charmed circle of Labour group, parties, senior officers and other assorted flunkies.

More has been said elsewhere about decentralisation, ie Walsall's Long Haul to Democracy, but even with these documents I felt strangely dissatisfied as if they were avoiding the real problem areas.

This was happening on one side and on the other the trade unions responded by saying that such issues as pay, job creation, protection, upgradings, disturbance payments, shorter hours excess travel costs etc were crucial. Well there is no doubt that they are important but there needed to be more. In the midst of all this I was trying to make sense of the distinctive nature of BF politics (it was so distinctive I couldn't quite put my finger on it). Such things as autonomy theory seemed to make little sense to me other than to make me feel dissatisfied with local government. In fact its more workerist and economic tendencies seemed at odds with what comrades in BF actually said. The more money less work syndrome seemed to be similar to the ~~the~~ groove the TU movement was stuck in today. Yet despite all this I did feel there was something there of value. In terms of developing a politics that is for the selfactivity of the class and its fragments then autonomy theory in its uniquely garbled way was saying something.

In retrospect as stewards involved in the transfer discussions we should have been challenging managements right to manage by demanding a reduction in the numbers and tiers of ~~the~~ management in conjunction with demands for worker and tenant control. Our demands should have been designed to challenge the continuity of power more effectively.

The mistakes we made in NAG allowed us to drift into a 'seizure of power' situation on the Executive Committee. This raised the question of incorporation and at the level of equal opportunities do we simply want the present power structures but with women and black people more represented within them?

A few weeks ago or was it months I saw an issue of London Labour Briefing which had a banner headline at the foot of the page. It read simply... "Labour take the Power". We should be rejecting this notion not because we reject the 'militancy, crisis, collapse, party power' scenario so excellently caricatured by McKenzie but because the question itself needs to be rephrased. Our tendency on the left should be part of that process, a process of permanent rebellion against the system and the state. Thus it is not the seizing of power that is important but the struggle itself at every conceivable level that it occurs.

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