

Mass Work and Big Flame

(A short, critical history of mass work and some suggestions on how we rebuild our relationship with the working class)

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For years in Big Flame we've said that "mass work" or "mass politics" is one of the main features that sets us apart from the rest of the revolutionary left. And by mass work, we've meant two things. First, that in organising in working class communities and in the workplace, we try to relate not just to the official representatives of the working class (tenants' association committee members, convenors, trade union officials or stewards) but to the mass of working class people in those situations, and in particular the most progressive sections of people - what we called the "mass vanguard". So in Tower Hill, during the rent strike, our members organised mainly among women tenants, and in Ford we direct ourselves more towards the line workers.

Second, it means that in our work in broad fronts and movements - like CND, TOM, NAC, ANL - we're opposed to an exclusive focus on the official labour movement; while we direct a lot of our efforts towards the working class, we're also concerned to involve people already involved in other progressive movements and struggles - to make links between, for example, the women's movement, the Irish struggle, the anti nuclear movement, and the anti racist struggle. Behind all this emphasis on mass work and movements lies our belief that socialism can only be made by the self-activity of the working class, and that liberation can only come about by the full flowering of all radical movements. In other words, without a mass revolutionary movement, there never will be a revolution.

Mass politics - the early years

Many of our ideas about how we carry out political work - and the emphasis on mass politics - grew up in the early days of Big Flame when it was a local organisation based only on Merseyside. As a result of contacts made by the Big Flame newspaper - then a local Liverpool community and workplace broadsheet - the first direct interventions in working class struggle began: in the 1969 and 1971 national Ford strikes, in the Pilkington strike in St Helens and in a series of rent strikes on various working class estates in Liverpool. Although the first contacts were often with stewards or tenants' leaders, increasingly these interventions took on a "mass politics" perspective.

For example: Ford Halewood

The first contact came when stewards from Halewood asked Big Flame to print leaflets for the 1969 strike. After the strike was over, however, it became increasingly clear that the stewards were frequently holding back shop floor struggles - about the pace of work, arbitrary discipline, and so on. Instead they were trying to get the shop floor to go through the grievance procedure, a long drawn out affair designed to take the steam out of disputes and agreed at high level between top union leaders and Ford management. In other words, the stewards were acting as policemen of the shop floor. Most of these disputes involved the line workers, but their stewards were always a minority on the stewards' committee with the off-line areas (inspectors, feeders, checkers - people with much easier jobs and bags of overtime) have more stewards per worker. These stewards were more likely to be right wing, and against the line workers' disputes, which always threatened to get them laid off. Increasingly Big Flame came to be seen as the voice of the hundreds of line workers.

External Interventions

Throughout this period, Big Flame was increasingly influenced by events and political theory in Italy - notably by the events of the Hot Autumn in 1971 when thousands of students joined together with thousands of workers mainly from car factories in Turin and Milan in major uprisings on the streets and in the factories of those cities. Out of the joint student-worker mass assemblies that were in continuous session, was born the organisation "Lotta Continua", and what was happening in Italy seemed of great relevance to an organisation like Big Flame which had come directly out of the student movements of the late 60's and the beginnings of the women's movement in the early 70's - and which was now trying to make links with the working class.

In this way, the theory and practice of external mass intervention was reinforced: the justification was the linking of the student mass vanguard with the working class mass vanguard. And so the practice of external interventions was established: external because the main initiative and dynamic for the intervention came from members of Big Flame who were outside the workplace or community around which they were organising.

Base groups

All this was reflected in the way Big Flame was organised internally, with most members belonging to a base group, which was the group in the organisation that co-ordinated one particular intervention: for example - the Ford Halewood base group; the GEC base group; the Tower Hill base group; the Docks base group. As other Big Flame groups started around the country, this model was repeated in the new branches.

The job of base group members was to maintain regular contact with as many working class people in that situation as possible - and through meeting, drinking and talking with them, develop a really intimate understanding of what was going on - week by week. To be inside the struggle, despite being outside the situation. In this way it was possible for the base group to begin to start making an analysis of the relationship between workers, unions, company and state plans (in the workplace), and between the working class people on an estate, the local council, the state and police (in the community). It was possible to begin analysing in detail the divisions between people. Together with their working class contacts, the base group could then work out the most important demands and tactics to publicise.

One big difference between Big Flame and the rest of the revolutionary left was the great importance we attached to maintaining a regular presence in any situation where we were organising - whether there were big struggles going on or not. And this meant regular leafletting every fortnight or so; regular paper or bulletin sales; a very different approach from, say, the SWP (then IS) who would parachute large numbers of members into a major strike, try hard to recruit, then leave shortly after the struggle died down to concentrate their efforts on a new priority.

The idea of the Big Flame base group was that by being inside the struggle in a consistent way and having a regular presence, it would be possible to start raising issues external to that particular workplace or estate: rents; all aspects of government policy; Ireland; struggles by workers in other factories or estates, in other cities and other countries; what we meant by socialism and communism; as well as raising major issues like racism, sexism and personal politics.

Finally, it was also thought that through this regular mass work, and through broad discussions within the base group, working class contacts would be able to develop an understanding of Big Flame's politics as a whole, and would eventually join the organisation without being calojed into doing so. In fact we were so hesitant about recruitment that this very rarely happened (and there were other reasons - for example that Big Flame was only a local organisation with no clearly defined and well worked out political tradition).

The strengths and weaknesses of base group organisation

Base group organisation had two fundamental strengths which are today increasingly absent from Big Flame branches. First - a clear orientation to the working class in struggle. And second - it meant that there was a collective practice and collective theoretical discussion around practical issues within the base group, and within the branch an interaction between the different base groups. So there was a framework of political support for individuals in the organisation.

But, the whole perspective of base group work was that of external intervention - and this has marked the whole development of Big Flame's political work ever since. There was no urgency felt to rapidly move from a primarily external intervention to a mainly internal intervention in which the working class people in that situation would gain confidence and power within the base group, eventually take over and make much less demands on the original members of the base group. This had the practical consequence that base groups collapsed when the ex student Big Flame members ceased to live on the dole and got themselves jobs which meant that they had much less time and energy. The only exceptions to this were the Ford base group where Merseyside Big Flame made a big effort to sustain the base group, and succeeded in recruiting two Ford workers - and those interventions on working class estates like Tower Hill where Big Flame members had gone to live.

Alongside this was a failure within Big Flame to make a high priority of political and practical education of contacts and new members - and an equal failure to recruit to Big Flame working class people who were close to the organisation.

Towards a new base group structure for Big Flame

It should be clear by now that the Industrial Commission is proposing a major re-orientation of the organisation towards the working class in struggle. We are looking at ways that this can be achieved in practice, and one way that has been suggested is that all branches should consider adopting a new version of the base group structure. The major differences from the base groups of the past will be first that they will prioritise internal interventions - recognising that the majority of Big Flame members are not students or on the dole, and second these will be a much higher priority on education and recruitment.

The idea is that all branches with sufficient members would consider dividing into groups of three or four, with at least one of the members living, working or organising in a working class situation. This group would then be the main forum for political support and political education of all its members in the sense that they would discuss the problems faced by all the members of the base group in their political work, and provide an education programme for contacts and new members. It would also give practical support whenever it's asked for - for example, to distribute a

leaflet or help organise a meeting - and this support would be available to all the members of the base group in all their various political activities. But the overall bias would be to the member organising directly in a working class situation - developing it rapidly into an internal intervention by sustained political work and political education leading to more working class contacts and recruits so that a majority of members of the base group are eventually working class people living or working in the situation around which the base group was organising as a priority (though hopefully some of the new ~~xxx~~ members will have got involved in other areas of work as well - in other campaigns or movements).

All this does not mean that our work within movements and campaigns will suffer. For a start, members of a base group whose main political work is in a broad campaign or movement will have an established and regular forum to discuss the problems of that work (in addition to the separate women's and men's meetings that now occur in many branches). They will be able to turn to members of the base group for practical or political support. Because the base group will, overall, have a clear working class orientation, this will add a new impetus and direction to our work in movements and campaigns - and - it will force the base group to include in their mass work in the working class the political questions raised by the movements or campaigns. In other words, it will help to get us in Big Flame to start forging the links we often talk about.

It will certainly increase the sense of collectivity and support within Big Flame, and with base group work as a major point of reference, it will enable commissions and the NC to have a clearer role - assessing what's going on in different regions and different areas of work, and preparing clear guidelines for our mass work both in movements and in the working class. In the same way, it will help focus the whole organisation on the role of the paper in building our base work and in building the organisation.

Towards a gradual revolution in Big Flame

If ~~xxx~~ changes like these were accepted in Big Flame, it wouldn't result in an overnight transformation. Rather, it would mean that we were once again on the slow road to trying to change ourselves into a working class and feminist socialist organisation. Working class people would, hopefully, begin to feel ~~xxx~~ that it was of real use to join the organisation, and would slowly feel confident to invite friends or relatives to join. In that way new situations - in the community and in new workplaces - would become possible for mass work to begin. Hopefully it would be a rolling snowball

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