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an introduction to

**Big  
Flame** 

Our Politics, History,  
Structures and  
Publications.

**10p**

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Big Flame is a product of the theory and practice of the late 60s: of the wave of workers', students' and womens' struggles that swept across the advanced capitalist countries. Many new groups were influenced by these struggles: especially France 68 and Italy 69, and developed separately from existing political traditions and tendencies. The political tradition which Big Flame regards itself as broadly part of is strong in many European countries, but it is neither united nor monolithic: its common feature being a desire to root strategies for socialism in today's realities, rather than impose timeless formulas from the past. But this recognition of the political tendency which we situate ourselves in is jumping the gun: we certainly did not start out with this understanding. In this pamphlet we outline a brief political history of our development.

# The Basic Political Positions of Big Flame

Our Draft Manifesto and other publications provide a developed account of BF's total politics. Below we deal with the points we believe to be essential, not only to BF, but to the creation of a mass politics tendency. These points were adopted at our last national conference. It is worth stressing first a few general points.

The fact that Big Flame has not developed out of any linear political tradition (for instance, Trotskyism) has been simultaneously a great strength and a weakness. Its weakness has been that we have often been slow to develop important perspectives and made many blunders through investigating through practice alternative political positions. It has also been an exhausting process, developing clarity without many aids has been a great strain on a small organisation. But on balance the strengths outweigh these drawbacks. We could not rely on any old formulas, because we didn't have any to draw on. Therefore, our politics, at best, has had the vitality and originality lacking from much of the British left. The response to our pamphlets and manifesto from so many militants confirmed this. Also we have only developed our politics as fast as our experiences and capabilities permitted. There are plenty of small sects with world views produced in offices and tested nowhere in practice. We hope BF is not one of them. We have been willing to learn from the struggles of the masses at home and abroad; also from other political organisations and traditions, notably in Italy, Chile and Portugal. Sometimes this has been too uncritical and eclectic, and not rooted enough in the specific British conditions. But we are still learning and our desire to found a politics creatively adapting the revolutionary traditions of Marxism, Leninism and others to the conditions of a changed modern capitalism is as strong as ever.

## THE BASIC POINTS

The following points are not a political programme, nor do they encompass all our politics, much of which we share with other currents in the Marxist movement. They are to help differentiate a mass politics tendency on the British left.

### **(1) Building a political practice based on the mass of the working class, not merely its representative layers.**

Socialist politics has lost its mass character as the working class has become progressively identified by the left with some of its representative organisations. Winning people within a relatively small circle of activists and changing leaderships becomes a substitute for, or separated from, changing mass consciousness and organisation. We reject routinised activity, particularly in the unions, that builds by creating paper organisations and passing resolutions. We are for genuine rank and file organisation, inside and outside the unions, independent of any party control; that will seek to take the struggle beyond trade unionism and reformism.

### **(2) Combatting reformism**

The view that identifies the problem of reformism as the relationship between the working class and the Labour Party leads to sterile entry or 'exposure' tactics that

are manipulative and self-defeating in most circumstances. As the problem of reformism lies primarily in the daily struggles of the working class, it is these we seek to transform. This political recomposition of the working class movement must take priority over the transformation of the traditional working class institutions (Labour Party, unions etc.)

### **(3) 'The Social Factory'**

Just as the working class is wider than the traditional labour movement, so it is also wider than the industrial sector. **The revolutionary organisation must locate its activity in the community and social sphere** in response to the changing composition of the working class and the structures of capitalism. We have to look further than the factory to have a total politics and reach all sectors of the class, most importantly, housewives.

### **(4) Class first, party second.**

This means that we must put the movement of class forces and class struggle before building the party; not in a chronological sense, but in a political one. It is out of the class struggle and its development that the tasks and growth of revolutionary organisation arise. The struggles will ultimately not flourish if treated as a recruiting ground. Neither can the problem of divisions and autonomous movements in the class be reduced to the existence of party fractions in each sector.

### **(5) For the autonomy of each specifically oppressed sector.**

We fully support and build the autonomous movements of women, black and gay people; including their independent organisation as only total proletarian power will defeat the system. But we also fight for their political autonomy which requires the development of strong socialist currents within the movements.

### **(6) A non-sectarian and non-authoritarian political method.**

We seek the maximum unity in action of all left forces. The structures and ways of working of the revolutionary organisation must be open and flexible enough to combine effective action with transformation by the struggle itself. Just as we seek to avoid a dogmatic and authoritarian relationship between party and class, so inside the organisation this must be reflected. No constitution or structure, no matter how perfect, guarantees against the degeneration and bureaucratisation of an organisation: only a living relationship with the mass movement can provide a firm basis for this.

### **(7) For a new internationalism.**

While furthering the Marxist traditions of anti-imperialism and support for national liberation struggles, seeking to link them to socialism: one of the main tasks is to make international struggles relevant to the British working class. This is not helped by imposing universal models of political strategy and abstract international links. Political and organisational links internationally should flow from our real capacities and development of the class struggle.

### **(8) No rigid separation of what we do before and after the revolution.**

We do not have any utopian illusions that islands of socialist humanity and personal freedom can be built within capitalism, but we see the necessity to take up the problems of transforming all social relations and relating socialist politics to the problems of personal life, sexuality and culture. The revolution we build without this will always carry the seeds of authoritarian degeneration.

But this recognition of the political tendency which we situate ourselves in is jumping the gun, for we certainly did not start out with such understanding. Below we outline a brief political history of our development.

# The Historical Development of Big Flame

In February 1970, the first edition of 'Big Flame' a 'Merseyside Socialist Newspaper' appeared. The name was taken from the title of a TV play by a Marxist playwright which dealt with the imaginary occupation of the Liverpool docks by port workers. It was the closing stages of the Wilson government and the trade unions were being pushed by the rank and file into a fight against 'In Place of Strife'. The paper was put together by members of most organisations on the left, plus some people influenced by libertarian ideas. This necessitated a lowest common denominator politics, which became inadequate for a political newspaper. Under growing pressure for clearer politics the working alliance came apart at the seams, despite still selling thousands of copies. By the time of its collapse in June 1971 it had produced seven editions.

After the collapse a nucleus of people remained — the libertarians plus some ex-members of Trotskyist and Marxist-Leninist organisations. As a small political collective with a large number of industrial contacts they became active aiding the Pilkington strike and a number of other shop steward committees. The main activity became trying to aid the formation of a Merseyside rank and file committee based largely on shop stewards. The meetings were attended by large numbers of militants, but they fizzled out through lack of perspectives beyond favouring unofficial strikes and rank and file activity rather than official union-led actions.

The role of the Big Flame nucleus was seen as servicing. We saw ourselves as a propaganda group attempting to encourage workers to think, act and organise for themselves. Political organisation external to the struggle was seen as unnecessary and dangerous to working class autonomy. This was in reaction to what was believed to be the lessons of France and Italy, as well as the dogmatic politics and rigid structures of existing organisations. During this period these limited perspectives were reinforced by the anti-organisation feeling of many militant workers who were becoming increasingly cynical about the Labour Party and who saw rank and file groupings as the means for developing class unity and co-ordination. Our anti-'Leninism' met the traditions of working class syndicalism in an uneasy marriage of some mutual benefit. It is also worth stating that the general political perspectives were extremely narrow, with little emphasis being put on organisation in the community or the growing questions arising from the new movements of women.

But we learnt one thing very fast. You cannot hope to encourage anyone to do anything by standing on the sidelines merely propagandising. You need political influence, trust and respect. To gain this a group has to consciously *intervene* in a non-manipulative way. Our learning focus was the Halewood Ford strike of 1971. During the strike we issued our first BF leaflet to Ford workers, but its line was in no way distinct from the stewards'. In fact, some of our leaflets went out bearing the imprint of the stewards committee, confirming our servicing role. Nevertheless, our interventionist practice already distinguished us from libertarian groups like

Solidarity, who had influenced some aspects of some comrades' politics. In October of 1971 came the first major internal change in BF — the setting up of 'base groups'. These were autonomous interventionist structures, linking external and internal factory militants to share experiences and put forward ideas and tactics in a mass way through leafletting etc. They existed at Fords, Standard Triumph and Plesseys and were sexually mixed groups.

Over the next year we gradually moved away from a servicing role. A consistent practice had made us alter our previously uncritical pro-stewards stance, which later enabled us to produce our first pamphlet — 'Shop Stewards and Class Struggle' — which had at the time a unique industrial perspective. We learnt that servicing meant subordination to politics which were not necessarily the best way of taking the struggle forward. We were attempting to stimulate self-activity but were not directly linked to that process; rather we were external agents, developing little shared political experience. But our move towards a more organised and independent existence was also influenced by the theory and practice of certain organisations like Lotta Continua in Italy, who combined a practice based on working class autonomy with an organised, general politics. The base group idea in particular was borrowed from Italy. They did seek to build a leadership in the struggle but not one based on an external ideological vanguard. Rather an internal leadership, a mass vanguard of the most active and conscious militants in the particular factory.

So, at this stage, BF was a federated organisation of autonomous base groups with a rudimentary form of co-ordination provided by a weekly general meeting of the ex-student component of the base groups. Slowly the group became a locally-based general political organisation. Weekly meetings began to discuss wider issues like Ireland, fascism and housing. Perspectives developed were binding on the whole group. We were very active in the wave of struggles in summer 1972, in particular the dockers' and building workers' strikes. Unfortunately, these struggles tended to reinforce a mechanical view of organisation imported from the Italian experience. We wanted BF to be transformed into an organisation inside working class struggle, whose composition and politics would be transformed by the mass struggle and the emergence of mass vanguards. This made us too dependent on spontaneous struggles, which anyway were not of the same character as in Italy. Our groups too often simply dissolved into the base structures eg tenants action groups. These perspectives, noble though they were, ignored the concrete daily problems of changing the group and integrating individual and small groups of working class people into BF, who were active with us and interested in our politics. To the outsider BF appeared as an impenetrable 'family', especially as many lived in the same households. The next phase of our development would see us consciously trying to break down this kind of model.

This was helped by three factors in particular. Firstly, in June 1972 the group began to produce a newspaper 'Big Flame' again — although obviously a 'line' paper not a rank and file one. This forced us to develop a more general politics and show a more public face. Although it was a Merseyside paper, random national sales also spread some of our ideas on a wider scale. Secondly, we began to spread our interventions to council estates. Inspired partially by Lotta Continua's 'Take Over The City' strategy, we realised the need to link factory and community struggles, initially in Halewood, the site of the Ford factory. The feeling that BF was too narrowly orientated towards male industrial struggle was being put forward with increasing force by the women within the group and it reflected the growing influence of the women's movement on BF.

Previously the women had been members of the industrial base groups, but had dropped out to begin separate activities. The power of the women in the group was developed firstly through regular women's meetings and secondly through the

community interventions. The most notable of these was during the long rent strike on Tower Hill, Kirkby, where Big Flame women worked closely with local women to develop a feminist perspective within the struggle as a whole. Finally, and probably the most important factor in transforming the group was the decision to create branches in various parts of Liverpool – initially four. This meant breaking up the group and sinking roots in the areas where we had been active, making BF more accessible to working class activists.

## BIG FLAME DEVELOPS NATIONALLY

In 1974 the ideas and practice of BF had begun to attract some national attention. Previously comrades who had wanted to work with Big Flame came to Liverpool. Then a BF group began to work around Ford Dagenham, which later developed into a general East London group. In the latter half of 1974 and early 1975 groups also sprang up in West London, Manchester and Birmingham. BF was organising primarily from ex-libertarians and local activists looking for a more organised politics and from ex-members of existing traditional organisations. The groups were only loosely federated, with little sharing of experience let alone common politics. In March 1975 we had our first national conference to try to pull together what had developed.

The centre of the conference was an attempt to agree on some 'minimum political agreement' which would be the basis for BF groups, existing and future. The perspectives of the Liverpool group were adopted, with some amendments. These reflected the maturing of our political ideas. We were no longer negatively anti-Leninist. We wanted to re-situate the traditions of Marxism and Leninism in the context of the modern class struggle. The context was the basis for our perspectives, based as it was on a new analysis of the functioning of modern capitalism. We rejected the view that capitalism in the post-war period was simply an extension of the previous epoch. For us the state, capital and the working class itself were very different things from before. While this analysis was shared by everyone in BF, the implications were more controversial. The conference adopted the following minimum agreement on organisation:

"The form and content of revolutionary organisation is determined by the stage of class struggle and the tasks that it imposes. But the final task of the revolutionary organisation is that of arming and leading the proletariat to the seizure of power, the destruction of the bourgeois state and the establishment of the proletarian dictatorship.

This is a constant content of revolutionary organisation and structures its tasks from its most embryonic stages. Without an awareness of this task our political activity can always fall towards gradualism, localism and syndicalism. At this stage Big Flame is neither a revolutionary party nor its embryo. This does not deny the need for the party, but recognises that it must be a product of a new level of struggle and real working class needs. At this stage BF is an interventionist cadre organisation trying to encourage the kinds of mass struggle that can break out of the existing reformist framework. By interventionist we mean that the bulk of our activity consists of mass collective interventions, organised and responsible to the group as a whole. By cadre we mean that BF seeks to combine the most potentially conscious and combative militants in its general organisation whilst maintaining the necessary openness and flexibility at base level."

This general position and the consequent move from federalism to a more centralised form of organising BF became the main reason for the split from Big



Flame of the East London group. Their objections were based partially on traditional libertarian grounds, but also they were influenced by the Power of Women and similar groups. This meant that they objected to an effective general organisation on the grounds that power hierarchies in the working class and between men and women had to be dealt with *first* by separate organisation in each sector. Despite this split, the conference also adopted minimum political agreements on *mass political work, socialisation of the struggle* (ie. the necessity to work in the community and link it to factory activity), the need for *independent organisation of specifically oppressed sectors* (in particular women, blacks and gays) and finally *support for national liberation struggles* (in particular in Ireland). The conference had barely dealt with strategic perspectives for our work in different sectors. But as a founding national conference this was inevitable. To help develop this we set up a *national committee* and a number of *commissions* (women, industry, education etc.) whose relationship was not too clear, but who had the responsibility to liaise to produce strategic perspectives.

The following year saw a number of developments in Big Flame. We started for the first time to seriously develop general and even international perspectives. We brought pamphlets out on Chile, Portugal and Ireland, which were extremely popular and original analyses which spread BF's name and politics. It reflected our growing involvement in a number of united front activities — Chile Solidarity, Troops Out, the Anti-Fascist Committees and later on Portugal. On Ireland in particular BF militants had been founding members of the Troops Out Movement and had put a lot of energy into building its national structures and local groups. New groups were formed in Sheffield and Leeds. For the other new groups it was a difficult time of establishing a collective identity and sinking some local roots to produce stable groups. In Liverpool the move into branches and new areas started to pay off. We were able to be present in many more struggles and build a strong presence in sections of the working class, as well as a small but growing working class membership.

That year saw us consolidate our strong points of activity, for instance, in the motor industry, and develop strongly in new sectors like hospitals. Our interventions in the community and housing struggles were particularly helped by the fact that the newspaper had at first been brought out on a regional basis. While this could not go on forever for political and technical reasons, it did give our politics the local and mass flavour that has always been one of the characteristics of BF.

So we went into our second national conference in a considerably more developed state and growing in membership. But we could not be wholly satisfied. October 1976 was right in the middle of a period of retreat of working class struggle. From the defeat of the left forces in the Common Market referendum the balance of power at most levels had swung against the working class. While fragmented and often sharp struggles continued, particularly amongst women and public sector workers, the wage freezes and cuts were being imposed without too much difficulty. The left was having to come to terms with the end of an era. Not merely one of the continued expansion of capitalism itself, but the end of an era of types of struggle based on that expansion. The previous ways of fighting and organising were proving to be inadequate. Capitalism, sided by the Labour Government, was not simply rationalising itself, girding its loins to see out the crisis; it was restructuring the public services and industries. A slow rethink of organisational and political strategies was being forced on the left. Big Flame was not unaffected by this process. Despite our advances we were still small. Our tasks and activities outran our resources. We could not consolidate a growing national presence. Our composition, despite improvements was not proletarian enough. We too felt the need to rethink and re-organise.

We were not pessimistic because we recognised that BF alone did not represent



the kind of politics we believed in. BF is part of a wider potential political tendency that believes in what we call mass politics. The other forces were scattered in local groupings, the autonomous movements and many in other larger organisations. The late national development of BF helps to explain this, although we have always been the most conscious and organised part of the mass politics tendency.

However, in order to overcome our organisational weaknesses and develop the forces that could put forward new perspectives to take the struggle out of its impasse, we decided on a new overall project for Big Flame. This was to be the creation with other militants of a *new revolutionary socialist organisation*, which, when formed, BF would dissolve into. This would require joint initiatives and collective work with other forces to develop a mass politics tendency. We gave ourselves a certain period to investigate the potential of this project, particularly through discussions around the manifesto we produced.

The perspective itself required that BF tighten up its political leadership, education and interventions. For the first time we created a five-person elected *National Secretariat*, that would work alongside the National Committee. Other perspectives developed at the conference included support for radical socialist candidates at the next election, as well as a position on the nature of Russia and China.

Since that decision a considerable amount of our national political activity has been around the investigation of the organisational project. Numerous meetings were held around the Manifesto, which sold out despite never being put on public sale. The very good response enabled BF to help in setting up a number of local groups interested in the project. There were also discussions with other political organisations, the most fruitful being with the Revolutionary Marxist Current, originally a split from the International Marxist Group. Although their main interest was in the formation of a new organisation, a period of joint activity led to their fusion into BF to aid that process.

Parallel to this there was also a tremendous upsurge of interest in BF itself, as we began to have more of a national presence. Particularly important in this was the production of pamphlets on *Trotskyism* and *The Crisis In Education*, which brought our wider political perspectives to a new audience. Secondly, there is our participation in united initiatives with other organisations and militants, notably in *Socialist Unity*, which aims at a united left slate of candidates at the elections. One of the by-products of these processes has been the national growth of BF itself, with members in many new places.

We realise now that our initiative towards a new organisation was part of a general shake up and rethink by many parts of the revolutionary left. While some organisations still go their own sectarian way, others are combining in increasing joint activity, despite their continuing differences. But the end result in terms of organisation is unclear at the present time.

At our recent 1978 national conference, Big Flame confirmed its commitment to a new organisation. But it was not accepted that this was a short term possibility, as such a process could neither involve the broad sections of militants that are necessary or work out the political problems that at present divide the left.

# The Structures of Big Flame

## - How it Works

### Membership

All people wanting to join Big Flame have a period of **associate membership**. This lasts for three months and the period is used for basic education, mutual learning and the investigation of potential types of activity. At the end of this period the associate member and the organisation decide whether to take up full membership. The decision is based on broad acceptance of the politics and programme, willingness to be active and payment of subs. While an associate member the comrade has full rights of participation (including voting) except for representing BF on internal or external bodies.

**The National Conference** is the sovereign decision and policy making body for all spheres of activity.

**The National Committee** is elected by the whole membership. It consists of eleven people, plus a voting delegate of the women's commission. Its job is to implement policy and to provide guidance and direction for the day-to-day work of the organisation. It is the decision making body between conferences and meets at minimum monthly.

A National Secretary, Education Organiser and Treasurer are also elected by the membership.

The National Committee elects a three-person, regionally-based Administration Committee, which executes aspects of National Committee policy and supervises the functioning of the NC and organisation as a whole.

### Commissions.

For each major sector of our work commissions formulate policy recommendations and feed into the decision making process, as well as organising the ongoing activity in their area. At the moment these include: Industry, Women, Hospitals, Anti-Fascism and Racism, Community, Teachers, Students, Ireland and Cultural.

Of these, the **Women's Commission** has a special status, not simply because of the importance of women's struggle, but because women are more than a sector. Its role is to organise the political activity of women in BF and to provide overall political perspectives for the whole of BF.

**District Committees**, or some equivalent, usually provide local political leadership and co-ordination of activity within the national framework.

**An Internal Bulletin**, open to all members and sympathisers provides the means of communication/discussion. Anyone interested in joining Big Flame should write to the national secretary or get in touch with the local group. For those interested in a particular area of activity, the national secretary will put them in touch with commission convenors.

# Big Flame Publications

**Big Flame Newspaper:** 10p. Subs. £2.25 per year/ £1.15 six months. Monthly.

**Revolutionary Socialism:** The Journal of Big Flame. Recently re-issued and more open, involving independent militants. Quarterly, 40p. Subs. £2.00 for four issues (Britain and Ireland); £3.00 (Europe) and £4.50 USA airmail. Back copies of previous journal 'Big Flame' (Nos 1 and 2) at 20p plus postage.

**Industrial Bulletin:** Duplicated publication for industrial militants, available from our Industrial Commission. 10p. Irregular.

**Irish Bulletin:** 10p. Irregular.

## Pamphlets

**Chile Si** — 1974, 20p. Perceptive account of the Popular Unity experience and of working class struggle, drawing on the writings of the MIR.

**Portugal: A Blaze of Freedom** 1975, 30p. Twice reprinted pamphlet giving the history and analysis of Portugal after the overthrow of the dictatorship.

**Ireland: Rising in the North:** Another big selling pamphlet combining interviews with analysis of the relation between the class and national struggles. Still useful for basic understanding of the Irish conflict. 20p. 1975.

**The Crisis in Education:** 1977, 30p. Pamphlet of the BF Teachers Commission attempting to re-assert a materialist analysis of the educational crisis. Of vital importance in the 'Great Debate', aiming to take educational struggle further than fighting the cuts and wage battles. Sections on teachers, pupils and parents, as well as the experience in Russia and China.

**Draft Manifesto for a New Revolutionary Organisation:** 1977, 25p. A comprehensive manifesto written to clarify our political positions and as a basis for discussing the organisation of a mass politics tendency.

**The Revolution Unfinished; A Critique of Trotskyism;** 1977, 50p. The first non-sectarian critique of Trotskyism. Attempts to link the strengths and weaknesses of Trotsky's original ideas, developed in the battle with Stalinism, to the theory and practice of the current Trotskyist organisations.

**A Close Look at Fascism and Racism:** 1978, 20p. A collection of articles first published in Big Flame newspaper. Topics covered range from 'police harassment of blacks' to 'women in Nazi Germany'.

## Pamphlets on community and industrial struggles in Britain

**We Won't Pay:** 1975, 20p. Account of the Tower Hill Rent Strike in Kirkby of 1972, stressing particularly the role of women. Of theoretical importance in analysing the role of community struggle and of housewives.

**Five Months of Struggle in Fords Halewood:** Produced by the BF Ford Group, it puts the account of a particular struggle inside a wider analysis of unions and stewards.

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