

INTRODUCTORY GUIDE TO BIG FLAME PERSPECTIVES



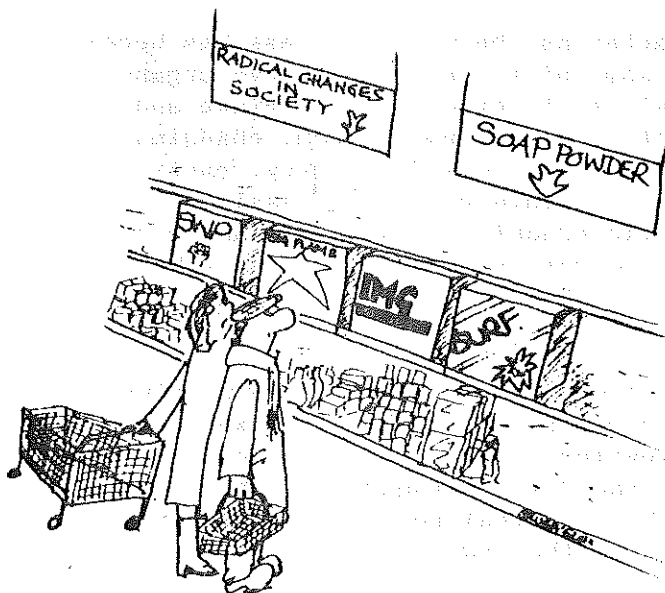
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INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS JULY 1980

This 'Introductory Guide to Big Flame Perspectives' is meant for sale to Big Flame members, Associate Members and sympathisers. It is not meant to be a document for public sale. None of the material contained has been specially written (except the reading lists) - rather it has been assembled from conference motions and other published material where no appropriate motions were felt to exist. It is therefore rather ad hoc in nature containing perspectives written over a 3/4 year period and which in places possibly may be contradictory. If it prompts people to say "we don't believe that ! do we ?" and leads to an updating/amending of our position (perhaps by a conference motion ?) then it will have served one of its purposes. More particularly on this point:-

a) There is nothing here about International perspectives. This is because there was little in the way of appropriate conference motions, and because the International perspectives section of the 'Manifesto' was felt by the International Committee to be so out of date and wrong as to be worse than useless. They are therefore preparing a new set of perspectives which will be added to this document as a supplement.

b) There is nothing said here about such subjects as nuclear power/weaponry, youth, gays etc. This absence is not because they weren't seen as important but because, if we're honest, Big Flame hasn't, as yet, had a great deal to say on those subjects. If this document has helped to show up some holes in our theory and practice then it will have served another of its purposes.



This cartoon first appeared in the BF pamphlet 'Organising to Win'. It prompted one comrade to comment that with soap powders, whatever their brand name, they were all owned by the same company !

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT BIG FLAME
WRITE TO: 217 WAVERTREE RD, LIVERPOOL 7

1. GENERAL INTRODUCTION

THIS INTRODUCTORY SECTION CONTAINS THE MEMBERSHIP CRITERIA FROM OUR CONSTITUTION (SECTION 1, CLAUSE 1A) AND THE 8 BASIC POINTS OF A MASS POLITICS TENDENCY CONTAINED IN THE PAMPHLET "AN INTRODUCTION TO BIG FLAME"

MEMBERSHIP CRITERIA OF CONSTITUTION

BIG FLAME is a revolutionary socialist organisation. Membership is based on:

- i) Payment of the agreed membership dues.
- ii) Activity in an area of struggle: Members in workplaces must join and attempt to be active in their appropriate trade union; and members not in waged work must be active in political organisation within the community or in a general political campaign which the organisation is concerned with.
- iii) Activity in the functioning of the organisation:
 - a) Attendance at branch meetings or reasons given for non attendance
 - b) Selling the publications of the organisation.
- iv) Agreement with the following minimum political basis:-
 - a) Socialism requires the destruction of the capitalist state by the self activity of the working class and its replacement by a system of proletarian democracy. Socialism cannot be won unless a socialist perspective is integrated with a feminist one. There can be no socialism without women's liberation.
 - b) The achievement of a socialist revolution requires the formation of a revolutionary party. BF is not such a party or its embryo, but in its activity in the class struggle and in its relations with the rest of the left is trying to create the conditions for the development of one.
 - c) Support for the political and organisational autonomy of the movements of the oppressed sections of the population - in particular recognition of the specific oppression of women, black people and gays.
 - d) Support for anti-imperialist struggles and the right of oppressed nations to self determination.

THE BASIC POINTS OF A MASS POLITICS TENDENCY

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. The 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 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 problems 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 a strong socialist current 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 the 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 SEPERATION 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.

FURTHER READING

Big Flame Publications

An Introduction to Big Flame - 10p - a brief introduction to our politics history, structure and publications.

Draft Manifesto for a New Revolutionary Organisation - 25p - A comprehensive manifesto written to clarify our political positions and as the basis for discussing the organisation of a mass politics tendency. 3 years old now and therefore out of date/inadequate in places but still the best single statement of BF's politics.

Big Flame Newspaper - 15p - monthly

Revolutionary Socialism - 50p - Big Flame's journal - every 4 - 6 months

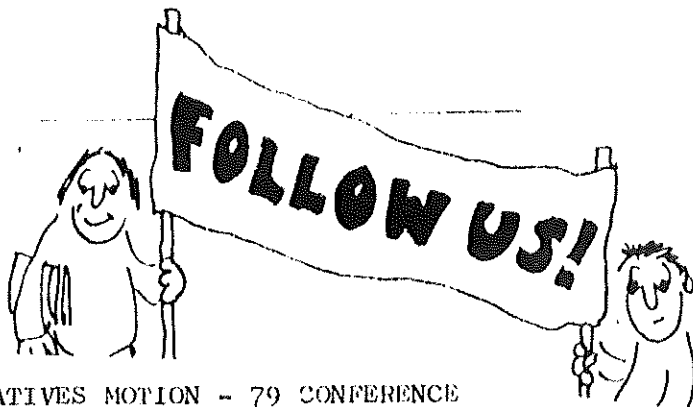
2. OVERALL STRATEGY

THIS SECTION ON GENERAL STRATEGY CONTAINS THE FIRST TWO PARAGRAPHS OF THE 1979 CONFERENCE MOTION ON PERSPECTIVES AND PRIORITIES AND THE CONFERENCE MOTION ON SOCIALIST ALTERNATIVES

PERSPECTIVES AND PRIORITIES MOTION - 79 CONFERENCE (part of)

The strategic goal of revolutionary socialists in the period of the Tory government is to fight for a break in the Labourist cycle, where reactionary Tory governments are replaced by Labour governments carrying out anti working class policies, without an advance in working class politics that would be the basis of a fightback against Labour. It is necessary to struggle against the belief that simple anti-toryism and wage militancy are sufficient bases for an alternative to the Tories and Labour. We must resist the drift on the left to channeling struggles through the Labour Party and placing demands on them and the Labour Left which reinforce illusions. (eg. "For a Labour Government with socialist politics"; "Sack Callaghan".)

That cycle can only be broken by challenging the defensive and narrow basis of much of existing working class politics, and stressing rank and file, socialist alternatives in industry, the services and social life in general. Although the initial basis for organising will tend to be defensive, correctly building the widest possible united front action, our role must be to raise more general and offensive perspectives and actions. In attempting to push struggles further, Big Flame is attempting to generalise this political approach through the left and wider sections of militants, accelerating a rethink on vital questions of strategy and tactics. The goal is to help build a socialist opposition in the working class that is not only anti-Tory, but distinguishes itself from both mainstream Labour and the reformism of its left wing.



SOCIALIST ALTERNATIVES MOTION - 79 CONFERENCE

1. Big Flame asserts that there are no "socialist alternatives" for running capitalism (either the capitalist economy as a whole, or individual capitalist enterprises.) Socialism requires a transfer of state power from the capitalist class to the working class as a first step towards the elimination of classes from society altogether. Alternative plans (for production, services, or for the economy as a whole) which do not pose the necessity of a transfer of state power are plans for the reform of capitalism, and should be seen as such.

2. Although Big Flame is a revolutionary communist organisation - with the aim of the revolutionary overthrow of class society - that doesn't mean that we are against all reforms. We are against all those elements of any reform which could divide the working class or weaken its ability to struggle and organise itself. But we are in favour of all those elements of any reform that will provide a better life for working class people or which can aid the struggle for the unification of the working class and increase our capacity for self-organisation and struggle.

3. In deciding a strategy and tactics in relation to any particular reform, we have to draw up a balance sheet of these various factors.

4. The essence of our position is: "no responsibility for any part of the system without working class power in society." The only exceptions to this position can be institutions which have won a significant degree of autonomy from capital and can play a major role in the struggle against it.

5. This is the framework in which we judge the alternative plans for production which are now being developed. We welcome these plans when they:-

- A) Contribute to the morale of the workforce fighting closures and redundancies
- B) Contribute to the propaganda for socialism by emphasising the potential for workers creativity, and their ability to control production in a socialist society
- C) Demonstrate the irrationality of a society which deprives workers of all means of controlling the products of their labour.

6. But we should also be clear that there is nothing inherently anti-capitalist in proposals by workers for alternative products, to be financed produced and marketed in the usual manner. Alternative production does not necessarily raise questions about class society and exploitation. And plans for alternative production have not yet been proven to lead to greater class consciousness, self organisation and combativity by large numbers of workers.

7. In our propaganda about alternative plans for production, we should both stress the positive aspects of such plans and the dangers if there was any attempt to implement such plans before a general transformation of society. And we should warn of the way such plans have been used (eg, Dunlops) as a substitute for struggle. For us, militant struggle - notably occupation and "secondary" picketing are the main way we can fight closure and redundancy.

8. Big Flame is totally opposed to any plans coming from the left for alternative ways of running the capitalist economy i.e before a transfer of power. That task can safely be left to reformists who will sacrifice all principles (particularly internationalism) and the standard of living of the working class to make their plans work.

NOTE: It should be added that this motion was passed narrowly at the 79 conference and caused much controversy. The debate inside Big Flame on "Socialist Alternatives" including workers plans, is continuing.

FURTHER READING

Big Flame publications

Labouring under the Tories or a Socialist Alternative? - 20p - argues the need to challenge the defensive basis of existing politics in the working class movement and stress instead rank and file socialist alternatives in industry, the public sector and social life in general.

Draft Manifesto for a New Revolutionary Organisation - see previous section

The Revolution Unfinished: A Critique of Trotskyism - 50p - an excellent, non-sectarian critique of Trotskyism which links the strengths and weaknesses of Trotsky's original ideas to the theory and practice of current trotskyist organisations. Interwoven with this are important elements of BF's theory and practice.

Revolutionary Socialism - 40p - Back issues 1-4 contain articles relevant to this section as does its forerunner Big Flame Journal - 30p - issues 1-2

Revolutionary Socialism - No 5 - 50p - is particularly related to general revolutionary strategy including articles on the Labour Party, feminism and the socialist alternative, crisis of the revolutionary left in Europe, and an interview with Mike Cooley on the Lucas Aerospace Alternative Plan

Other useful reading

Where does one start - the subject is so enormous - Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Mao Luxembourg, Gramsci ? Perhaps what does need to be pointed out is that in the early 70's Big Flame was heavily influenced by the writings of 'Italian Marxism' and the theory and practice of Lotta Continua, the Italian revolutionary group. Its a controversial subject to what extent those ideas are still accepted or have been rejected by Big Flame but if you want to delve further then the publications of Red Notes are the best English source of 'Italian Marxism'

3. INDUSTRIAL

THE FOLLOWING SECTION CONTAINS TWO ITEMS - A REPORT WRITTEN BY THE BIG FLAME INDUSTRIAL COMMISSION TO THE WEEKEND SCHOOL IT ORGANISED IN MAY 80 AND A SHORT MOTION ON RANK AND FILE ORGANISATIONS FROM THE 79 CONFERENCE

For us in Big Flame, there's one lesson that stands out from every recent struggle whether its ended in victory or defeat. Its clear that without the mass participation and organisation of the rank and file in their struggles, YOU CANNOT WIN.... Whatever its eventual outcome that's the lesson of the steel strike this year, the miner's strikes in 1972 and 1974 and the lorry drivers' dispute last year. All of these struggles saw a tremendous development of power and confidence by the mass of workers - which shook trade union leaders and governments alike.

The same lesson comes out of the recent disasters at Leyland. For years shop floor power at Leyland has been under attack. The introduction of Measured Day Work, national bargaining over wages and new disciplinary codes have been combined with the blackmail of closure and sackings if any resistance was offered. At the same time the Leyland shop stewards organisation was drawn closer to management through joint management-shop steward participation schemes. Stewards began increasingly to act as policemen of the shop floor - making sure the membership kept to high level agreements between unions and management. Faced with this, the rank and file have become divided and demoralised

Under Labour, this kind of policy was carried out in sector after sector of industry. Their strategy was clear: to undermine rank and file power, while giving more power and responsibility to the trade union leadership. That's the importance of the Social Contract and the "Concordat" with the T.U.C. There's no doubt that all this has seriously weakened shop floor organisation throughout the industry. That's why, in the face of the all-out offensive of the Tories, its not enough to say "Defend the Unions". The Employment Bill is not a direct attack on trade union leaders. It IS a direct attack on the power of the rank and file to control and take a full part in their own struggles.

The defeat of the Tory offensive will only be brought about by the full mobilisation of the rank and file. But with the present state of shop floor organisation, that's not going to be easy. We cannot hope that people will defend the unions until they feel that the unions are THEIR organisations. So, in our view, to defend the unions we're going to have to rebuild the unions from the bottom up. In other words we're going to have to rebuild rank and file power, and fight for greater democratic control.

What we're talking about is a POLITICAL battle among the MASS of workers - struggling against the things that divide us (like differentials, some people having to work much harder than others, racism, sexism, unemployment..) - building unity, organisation, and the confidence to fight, and developing socialist ideas and class consciousness in the struggle.

This sounds fine in practice. The trouble is that this kind of mass political work is carried out hardly at all by many revolutionary socialist organisations and their members. The political and practical skills for mass work among the rank and file are given a very low priority by most organisations, whose first concern is to teach their members the skills of recruitment and how to put over the party line. What this means is that while many comrades can discuss for hours the finer points of what went wrong in the Russian revolution, they are hopeless at writing and duplicating a mass leaflet for their workplaces and relating socialist politics in a way that makes sense to their workmates.

AGAINST THIS TRADITION WE STAND FOR:

1. Consistent work among the mass of workers in your workplace - as well as in the trade union branch and shop stewards or representatives committee. This means patiently taking up all the problems and struggles faced by working class people in their everyday lives and showing how they connect with general militant socialist politics. The kinds of issue we're talking about are there all the time - battles with supervision; attempts to force us to work harder; racism; falling standards of living; the fact that most women have two jobs (one unpaid in the home)...

2. Rebuilding trade unions at all levels. Too many comrades spend their time "exposing" right wing union leaders in small, badly attended union meetings - and doing little else. Apart from not getting us very far, it's too easy to blame defeats always on leaders. Often there are problems from top to bottom of a union: among the rank and file, among stewards and convenors - as well as the full time officials and General Secretaries.

Exposing and changing leaders is important - but its not enough by a long way. The only way to guard against union leaders selling out is a struggle to have a rank and file united, powerful and confident enough to impose their demands and methods of organisation on their leaders

3. Where it's possible we're strongly in favour of building genuinely independent rank and file organisations with openly socialist politics. It IS possible to build organisations of this kind, which are non-sectarian and trying to win a mass base - "Fightback", the Ford Workers Group (Combine) and Building Worker are what we have in mind. But too often rank and file organisations are just a front for one particular organisation or party, created mainly as a pool of potential recruits. That kind of organisation never really grows because workers are rightly wary of being manipulated.

The long term aim must be that rank and file organisations with a real base in their workplaces come together with militant stewards committees (as long as they are really representative) to form a broad based socialist rank and file movement organised among the mass of workers in a majority of workplaces.

RANK AND FILE ORGANISATIONS - CONFERENCE MOTION 1979

This conference believes that no single organisation yet has the right to declare itself to be THE Rank and File Movement. A genuine national rank and file movement can only be created on the basis of previous sectoral and local non-sectarian organisations, and with firm indications of real support in the working class.

Big Flame reaffirms the need for a socialist perspective for rank and file organisations, with an orientation to the mass of the workers, not just their "representative layers". However we will continue to work in existing rank and file groups where they meet the needs of particular situations; we will support genuine "one off" initiatives such as the national rank and file conference; and we will argue for our positions within such forums.

FURTHER READING

Big Flame publications

Organising to Win - 60p - A comprehensive analysis of why so many workplace struggles have been defeated in recent years, and a guide to how to start reversing the tide and how to build rank and file power and organisation at work - drawing out the lessons from recent struggles.

Organising to Win - draft version - 35p - available in duplicated form from BF this original draft is much longer and goes into a lot more detail about the nuts and bolts of organising at work.

Revolutionary Socialism No 3 - 50p - The BF journal which contains an article by Richard Hyman - "Shop Stewards as Full Time Officials"

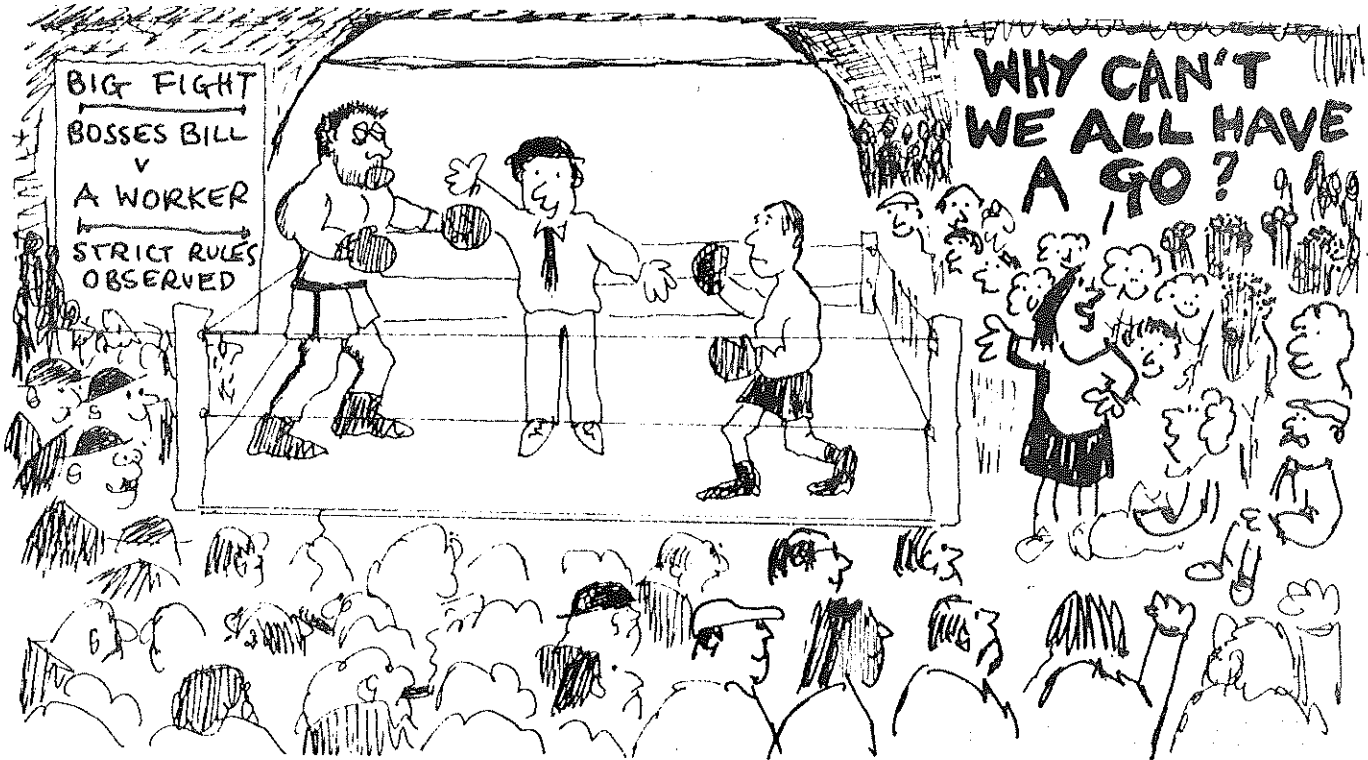
Shop Stewards and the Class Struggle - Now out of print but some BF members will have a copy to borrow. BF's first ever pamphlet which contained, at the time, a highly original and controversial critique of shop stewards under Measured Day Work.

Other useful reading

* Huw Beynon's books/pamphlets - Working for Ford (Penguin 1973) and What Happened at Speke (1978)

* Various articles in International Socialism about the SWP's assessment of industrial struggle:- Striking into the 1980's IS. No 5 (Summer 79), The Balance of Class Forces in Britain Today IS. No 6, British Trade Unionism IS No 8.

* Workers Struggle and the Development of Ford in Britain - by Ferruccio Gambini available from Red Notes - an analysis based on theoretical developments in Italian Marxism which were very influential on BF's industrial practice in the mid 70's particularly - contains much material supplied by BF from Fords.



4. CUTS - PUBLIC SECTOR

CUTS MOTION - 1979 CONFERENCE

This conference resolves:-

1. That Big Flame should adopt as one of its main priorities in this period the struggle against the cuts in public expenditure, In particular BF will:-

- a) Aim to be centrally involved, on a long term basis where possible, in any local anti-cuts campaign, union branch, or Trades Council (etc.) initiative which takes up the fight against the cuts.
- b) Argue for a working class/feminist perspective within these bodies, aiming particularly at public sector workers, consumers of the service and industrial workers. (We recognise in particular the need for mass-based political publicity)
- c) Argue for a feminist perspective, recognising that women are affected by the dismantling of the Welfare State in two main ways. Firstly as unpaid workers in the home having to take on extra work and living in poorer conditions. Secondly as low paid wage earners losing their jobs.

Cuts are part of a general policy of forcing women back into the home and of reinforcing the family structure. To enable women to participate more fully in the fight back, campaigns must be arranged so that they take account of the needs of women for support eg. babysitting, provision of creches, times of meetings. We should push for all campaigns to be open to all women and aim their propaganda towards women both inside and outside the unions.

d) Argue for the taking of effective action in two ways. In the medium term for forms of protest and civil disobedience action (non-cooperation, occupations, lightning strikes, harassment of officials, lobbies and demonstrations etc) aimed at delaying the cuts or preventing them being implemented. In the long term, for the taking of widespread industrial action by public and private sector workers, including strike action, work-ins and occupations.

e) Argue for the politics of "socialist, class alternatives" in all areas of the public sector.

2. Big Flame will also strive to establish in each sector (or support where similar exists) a national, independent, democratic focus and structure for a class struggle perspective, to be more than a front for the left, and oriented to, and representative of the struggles on the ground.
3. Big Flame will support any discussions and meetings at all levels with any left forces aimed at strengthening the above work and the anti-cuts struggle.
4. Big Flame recognises that many Labour Councils and Councillors, partly through pressure from the cuts campaign, will refuse to implement the Tory cuts. This will help to escalate the anti-cuts fight into a more general political crisis for the Tory government. Big Flame should begin now to argue within the cuts campaign for maximum pressure on and involvement with those councils and councillors willing to fight the cuts, but without compromising the political autonomy of the struggle or relying on any reformist leadership.
5. Big Flame should consider the possibility, with others, of standing class struggle candidates in next years' local elections, particularly in those areas where Labour candidates refuse to take an explicit stand on refusing to implement the cuts.
6. Big Flame as an organisation will support and assist this work publically and internally, by organising meetings, educationals, and discussions on perspectives etc that are needed by its members and supporters, insofar as it is capable.

FURTHER READING

Big Flame Publications

THE CRISIS IN EDUCATION - 30p - an analysis of the restructuring of education which argues for taking struggles further than fighting the cuts and wage battles. Sections on teachers, pupils and parents, as well as the experience in Russia and China.

Revolutionary Socialism No 4 - 40p - articles on local organising and peoples medicine

Big Flame Journal No 1 - 30p - article on "Autonomy and the Social Struggle" - 1975 - a controversial analysis of how the state has extended into all forms of social relations, turning the community into a 'social factory'

Other Useful Reading

There's a number of publications or periodicals etc which can broadly be said to have come from 'our tendency' on the far left - some of which BF members have had a hand in writing. Among them are:-

* The Local State - Cynthia Cockburn 1978 - puts 'community struggle' and conflict with local government into a Marxist analysis of 'struggles over reproduction'

* Struggle Over the State & In and Against the State - 1980 - both from the CSE (Conference of Socialist Economists) - the first is concerned with cuts and restructuring, the 2nd with changing the state whilst working for it.

* There's a whole range of pamphlets/periodicals written from a broadly Marxist perspective eg Community Action (bimonthly), CDP reports, CIS reports

* On Health there's The Political Economy of Health by Doyal & Pannell, and Cuts and the NHS, what are we fighting for? by the Politics of Health group plus there is all the material that has been produced by FIGHTBACK in the health service, on fighting cuts, keeping hospitals open etc.

* Education Fightback - 15p - is a recently started campaigning newspaper to help fight cuts in every sector of education

* Then finally there's the old (1972?) Lotta Continua pamphlet Takeover the City which played an important part in influencing Big Flame's politics

5. WOMEN'S STRUGGLE

THIS SECTION ON WOMENS' STRUGGLE CONTAINS SEVERAL MOTIONS FROM THE 1978 BF CONFERENCE - ON HOUSEWORK, SOCIALIST FEMINIST CURRENT AND RAPE, A PARAGRAPH FROM THE PERSPECTIVES AND PRIORITIES MOTION AT THE 79 CONFERENCE - ON ABORTION AND SELECTED PARAGRAPHS FROM THE BF WOMEN'S COMMISSION REPORT TO THE 1977 OPEN CONFERENCE.

HOUSEWORK MOTION - 78 CONFERENCE

We recognise that housework is work and that the issue is of critical importance to women's liberation. We want to minimise the amount of housework we do. We want to challenge the concept of housework as women's work. We want to give women a choice and make housework a social responsibility. We therefore need to fight for

1. Socialisation of housework, paid for by the state and under community control
2. No cuts and an increase in the social wage in order to resist attempts to intensify unpaid labour at home.
3. An independent income for all.
4. No division of labour between men and women, inside or outside the home.
5. As part of the struggle for socialisation of housework and breaking down the division of labour we need money and facilities from the state to make housework easier.

This means the provision of decent, well-planned housing equipped with time-saving gadgets. Also money, equipment and support for the care of the sick, the elderly and the handicapped where their care in the home is preferred. These five points should be seen as a framework for our work in the community on the issue of housework. At the same time we accept that women's position in the family and in society as a whole cannot be reduced simply to the housework issue and this framework needs to be developed together with perspectives on women in the workplace, rape and domestic violence against women; women's right to control their own bodies and the continued fight against sexism in all its forms.

SOCIALIST FEMINIST CURRENT MOTION - 78 CONFERENCE

Given the task before socialist feminists to develop a socialist feminist theory and practice and also given our failure to create a movement that is a meaningful alternative to the lives of working class women, we propose that Big Flame women support in practice as well as theory the socialist feminist network in the women's liberation movement.

Concretely this means working within the structured organisation of the socialist feminist current ie contributing to and selling Scarlet Woman - involvement and debate at local, regional and national socialist feminist conferences. It also means that we orientate our work to take up the ideas being developed. We must also make sure that our ideas are taken up eg. the future of NAC - development of Womens Aid - working in the community and around housework.

AGAINST RAPE AND VIOLENCE TOWARDS WOMEN MOTION - 78 CONFERENCE

We must:-

1. Oppose and propogandise against rape and sexual violence. This means consciously changing your own lives and behaviour and that of workmates/friends. Tell people the facts about rape instead of trivialising/joking about it.
2. Support the 7th demand of the WLM against rape and violence towards women
3. Support Rape Crisis Centres/Groups where they exist and demand that they be funded by the state and controlled by the women who use and run them, like Women's Aid refuges.
4. Work more actively around the 6th demand of the WLM in support of lesbians and for the right of women to define their own sexuality

PERSPECTIVES AND PRIORITIES MOTION - 79 CONFERENCE (part of)

Big Flame commits itself to work in the campaign for abortion rights, which is international. and to develop the perspective "A Woman's Right to Choose", to include such issues as womens health, nursery provisions, and general aspects of fertility control and sexuality. This means that men as well as women in the organisation commit themselves to fundraising or supporting these issues in their workplaces, union branches and in all their political activity.

NOTE:- Big Flame's attitude towards NAC - what does women's autonomy mean within NAC, should it be single issue or broaden out, what is the role for men in it ? is currently under debate within the organisation.

BIG FLAME WOMEN'S COMMISSION REPORT TO 1977 OPEN CONFERENCE (selected bits of)

Big Flame women have tried to work in a way which bridges the 'gap' between women's liberation/revolutionary politics and the daily lives and struggles of women. Inside the women's liberation movement we've argued that the question isn't 'how do we bring more women into the movement' but going outwards and involving women's liberation in the struggles that working class women are waging.

This isn't putting down all the different groups and activities which have been one of the strengths of the women's liberation movement. Consciousness raising groups, women and health groups, women and culture groups, women and sexuality groups, women and socialism, women and lesbianism groups, women's self defence groups etc are all important in their own right. But it isn't a matter of choice We want to overthrow capitalist society and build communism. This won't happen without the active involvement of the mass of women

.....

Our starting point is that housework (including looking after the kids, shopping and cooking) is central to the exploitation of women in this country. And women's struggle against it is central to building women's power and class power.

This is a completely different position from those who say that:-

" Housework, women's position in the home, holds women back from participating in the class struggle i.e in a waged job. So we have to fight for equal pay and opportunities, nurseries and abortion so that women can have the Right to Work Only in a waged job can women build up power. Full time housewives can't."

The struggle against housework doesn't mean trying to ignore the fact that it defines and affects the lives of all women, working class women with no money especially. The struggle against housework isn't a means to an end ie, class struggle. It is class struggle as fought by the mass of women day in and day out.

Women in the community, full time housewives, have proved that when they organise collectively they can build up power, break down loneliness and isolation, begin to win some control over their own lives, improve their living and working conditions.

FURTHER READING

Big Flame publications

Big Flame Women's Pamphlet - due out in the next few months.

Women's Struggle Notes - 15p - no longer produced but back issues No 2 - 5 are available

We Won't Pay - 20p - 1975 - account of the Tower Hill Rent Strike in Kirkby in 1972, stressing particularly the role of women. Of theoretical importance in analysing the role of community struggle and of housewives. A similar article appears in Big Flame Journal No 1 - 30p - 1975. Both are of limited availability

Revolutionary Socialism - the Big Flame journal which contains several articles

No 2 - A Woman's Right to Choose

No 3 - Women and Waged Work

No 5 - Feminism and the Socialist Alternative

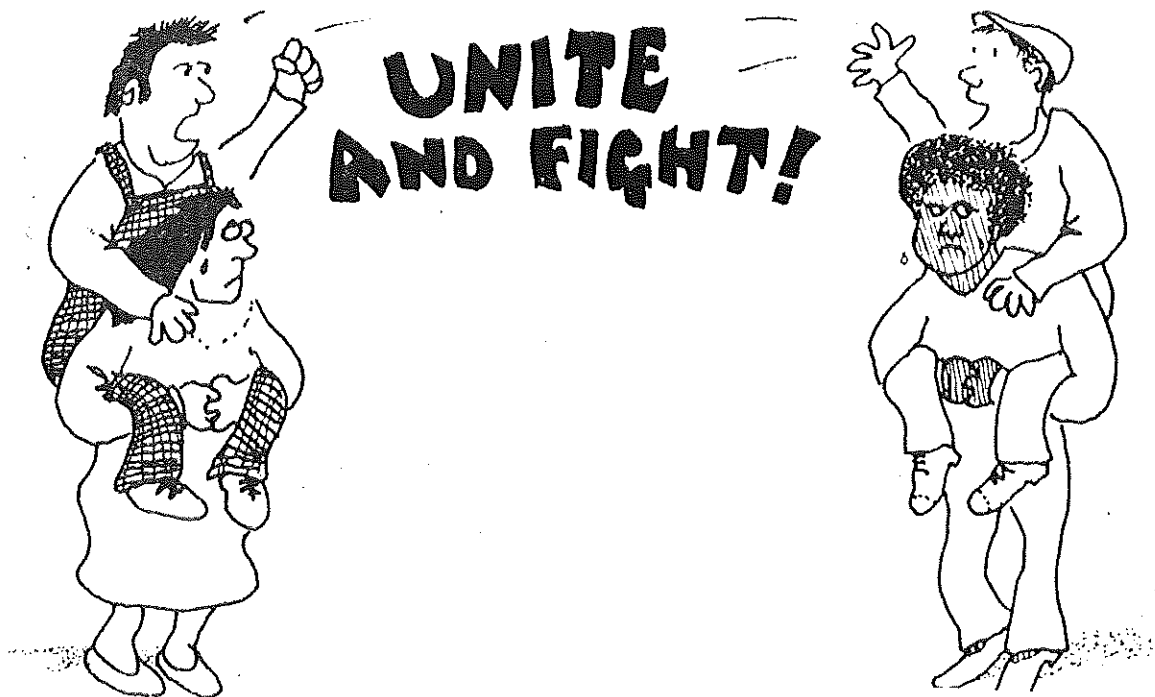
Other useful reading

The Feminism and the Socialist Alternative article in Rev Soc 5 gives a short reading list of recent articles/books exploring the relationship between feminism and socialism. Foremost among them must be Beyond the Fragments by Rowbotham/Segal/Wainwright which is a powerful critique of traditional 'left' organisation and starts to explore what lessons socialists can learn from the women's movement. Also there is:-

* For her Own Good - Barbara Ehrenreich

* The monthly periodicals - Spare Rib, and Womens Voice

* And a whole range of feminist novelists going from Doris Lessing in the 50's & 60's to more modern (mainly American) writers like Marge Piercy.



6. ANTI - RACIST/FASCIST

ANTI-RACIST, ANTI-FASCIST WORK MOTION - CONFERENCE 79

Big Flame commits itself to :-

1. Maintaining our support for 'No Platform for Fascists' but place less emphasis on anti-Nazism and more on anti-Racism in line with the decisions of the ANL National Conference.
2. This will entail making the new ANL structure work (probably against the opposition of the leadership)
3. Further, it will require supporting initiatives taken by the Black Movement
4. Especially campaigning strongly against ALL Immigration Controls, the new Nationality Law and against attempts to deport immigrants, emphasising in particular discriminatory practices in relation to women.
5. Support moves against increased state repression as shown by examples such as the SPG's murder of Blair Peach, the use of immigration and 'sus' laws to harass black people, and the use of the courts as in the Southall trials for the political purpose of defusing the black community.
6. Take up the politics of culture and its connection with racism, thus being able to offer clear opposition to statements like that of P.M Thatcher about being invaded by an 'alien culture'.
7. Recognise that racism doesn't have national boundaries, for example that media hate-coverage of Southern Africa winds up racism in the U.K. See as part of our anti-racist work to support and provide propaganda for anti-imperialist and liberation struggles in Ireland, Zimbabwe, the Caribbean and India/Pakistan.

8. Learn from black and white women's contribution to anti-racism and anti-fascism, struggling to make those lessons widespread whenever we can. This will include organising education meetings, recognising the theories of the fascist Master Race depend on sexism and must be fought in an anti-sexist way and changing our ideas about organising on the street.

9. Maintain our support of struggles against the cuts and to defend and extend working class power, but with a realisation that one of the main targets - the public sector - relies very heavily on black labour and that the anti-racist element will be important in being able to win these struggles.

Conference also instructs the anti-racist/anti-fascist commission and the NC to initiate a national discussion in BF within the next 12 months on the key slogans and political perspectives and programme on matters related to immigration controls and nationality. This would include discussion of whether the slogan 'No immigration controls' is correct as the central demand or whether a more specific set of demands would be better (Repeal the 1971 Act; no to the Nationality Bill; for the right to dual nationality; automatic renewal of work permits etc.)

NOTE: A national ballot of BF members is just about to take place on several motions related to the above point.

FURTHER READING

Big Flame publications

The Past Against Our Future - fighting racism and fascism - 50p - a comprehensive analysis of fascist movements of the past, the historical basis of the racism that exists in our society today, modern developments in racism and fascism and their relationship to the overall crisis in society, the past successes and failures of the anti racist/anti fascist movement; ending with recommendations for taking the struggle forward.

Sexuality and fascism - 25p - A reprint of papers from a Big Flame day school on women in Nazi Germany, women and the N.F; and the NF and masculinity and fascism

A Close Look at Racism and Fascism - 20p - Articles from the Big Flame newspaper covering such topics as fascism and women, The National Front and youth, police harassment and black people.

Revolutionary Socialism No 2 - 50p - The BF journal which contains an article - "Black Autonomy and the Class Struggle"

A list of other useful reading can be found at the back of Past Against Our Future - apart from books and pamphlets it recommends the following periodicals:- SEARCHLIGHT, RACE AND CLASS, RACE TODAY - and to add one glaring omission to its reading list - Asian Women, Finding a Voice by Amrit Wilson

7. IRELAND

THE FOLLOWING SECTION ON IRELAND CONTAINS PART OF THE 1978 MOTION TO CONFERENCE AND ALL OF THE 1979 MOTION.

IRELAND MOTION - 78 CONFERENCE (1st two sections)

1. Big Flame agrees that:

- a) British domination of the North of Ireland remains the main factor determining the balance of class forces throughout Ireland.
- b) The British domination of the North remains a major factor in determining the balance of class forces in Britain.

2. Big Flame recognises that:

- a) The only basis on which the long term problems facing the Irish working class can be solved is by dismantling the Ulster statelet and by the establishing of the right to self determination for the Irish people as a whole
- b) The creation of a unified Ireland through the struggle for national self-determination will be a step forward in the struggle for socialism in both Ireland and Britain.

IRELAND MOTION - 79 CONFERENCE

1. Big Flame reaffirms its unconditional support of all anti-imperialist Republican activity to defeat the British military occupation of the six counties, and the realisation of the self-determination of the Irish people as a whole. Principle among these are the Provisional Sinn Fein, the Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP) and the Relatives Action Committee. Big Flame also recognises the crucial and political role of Women against Imperialism in the fight against imperialism and for feminism.
2. Over the last two years the military struggle has maintained the anti-imperialist offensive through periods of unclear political direction.
3. Big Flame recognises that the Republican Movement must decide where it takes up military activity against British imperialism without overtones from the left in this country. The recent past has shown that the Republican Movement is as capable of learning from its mistakes as any other anti-imperialist struggle.
4. We should continue to stress the importance of the Irish struggle in our political activity. We recognise the important role UTOM and Women and Ireland have played in increasing the level of consciousness and activity on Ireland throughout Britain in the last two years. Our contribution to UTOM is limited by our size but this must not stop us from continuing to prioritise Irish work at least at the present level. The issue of Ireland should be raised again and again on the left and we should be prepared to criticise the left and the wider socialist movement for their lack of seriousness and conviction over the Irish struggle. The criticism should be comradely but consistent.

TROOPS OUT NOW: SELF DETERMINATION FOR THE IRISH PEOPLE AS A WHOLE:
SOLIDARITY WITH ALL IRISH ANTI-IMPERIALIST ORGANISATIONS.



FURTHER READING

BIG FLAME PUBLICATIONS

Ireland, Rising in the North - 20p - 5 years old but still stands the test of time as to why the republican struggle is a class and anti-imperialist struggle which requires our unconditional support.

Irish Bulletin - 10p - Not currently being produced but some of the back issues are excellent and still available.

"How can I raise the Question of Ireland From Day to Day" - A Big Flame discussion bulletin article (Oct 79) - a superb 'nuts and bolts' guide to solidarity work.

Other useful reading

The discussion bulletin article above has extensive recommendations for further reading (and films & slides) but to pick out a few:-

- * Regular publications include Troops Out (T.O.M.) monthly, An Phoblacht/Republican News (Provisional Sinn Fein) weekly, Saor Bhean (Women against Imperialism) bi-monthly, Ireland Socialist Review - occasional.
- * British Soldiers Speak out on Ireland) available from Information on
- * The British Media and Ireland - 50p) Ireland,
- * War in an Irish Town - Eamonn McCann

8. PARTY & CLASS

THIS SECTION ON PARTY AND CLASS CONTAINS THE STATEMENT ON PARTY AND CLASS IN BIG FLAME'S 1977 "MANIF ESTO" 'TOWARDS A NEW REVOLUTIONARY SOCIALIST ORGANISATION

1. A vanguard organisation that collectively intervenes to direct and develop class struggle is necessary. That necessity arises out of consciousness, experience and struggle in the working class. It needs to be a VANGUARD because the function of a revolutionary organisation is to earn the right to lead by being rooted in the working class and its struggles. This enables it to systematically express the needs of the class through demands, programmes and actions. Such an organisation is based on bringing together conscious and active militants as CADRES, with the education and training to act as members of a combat organisation.

At a further stage when the struggle and the vanguard have reached a certain level of maturity, the party will also be necessary. Its main role is in arming and leading the proletariat to seize power. Seizing power against the modern and complex bourgeois state is not as straight forward as in Russia in 1917. But this only amplifies the need for a party. The existence of autonomous working class organs of popular power (Soviets, People's Council's etc.) is the most important aspect of the revolutionary process; but they do not guarantee victory. They do not dissolve differences of interest overnight, solving all tactical and strategic problems.

Nor can they carry the main weight in combatting the strategies put forward by the reformist forces. The recent events in Chile and Portugal emphasise clearly that the centralisation of the revolutionary vanguard in the party to 'seize the time' is still necessary. This is not to underestimate the complexity of the problems, not to reduce everything to the existence of the party. But the crisis and the struggle for power reach crucial moments when decisive action is needed. This action, conditioned as it is by highly complex military and political and ideological considerations is beyond the capacity of the organs of popular power.

The party is also vital in consolidating victory through the dictatorship of the proletariat, and ensuring that the revolutionary victory is sustained. In that period, with enemies inside and outside, harrasing the new worker's state, with 57 varieties of opportunist jumping on the revolutionary bandwagon - then inside the mass democracy of the socialist state, there needs to be an organisation of proven, dedicated militants. Any organisation that seeks to be effective in the struggle must also seek to centralise its own leadership, resources and strategies: while organising discussion and implementation in the most democratic way possible.

It must be recognised however that the degree of centralisation must serve the needs of the situation. An ossified and bureaucratic leadership is the inevitable result of centralisation which arises from a purely abstract principle applied without reference to the level of development of class struggle.

2. As important as any of these organisational principles are, they are a long way from telling us anything about the relationship between party and class. There are no universal formulas that can be applied to every situation, nor does any structure - democratic centralist or otherwise - guarantee being in touch with the needs of the class struggle. Formal principles must take second place to an understanding of the content of the specific conditions of those struggles.

Organisations must flow from and meet the needs of the conditions or it is a bureaucratic imposition from above. Conditions change; Capitalism, the state and the working class are very different from what they were in the pre-war period. Whenever consciousness, organisation, and capacity for struggle are regarded as unchanging things OR when objective conditions are always regarded as ripe but the subjective factor of leadership is missing: disastrous political mistakes are made.

3 The idea of revolutionary organisation has been devalued by repetitive and unimaginative formulas being put forward no matter what changes in conditions. There has been an overemphasis on the problem of leadership. An exaggerated belief in the lack of correct leadership as the sole cause of failure in struggle and seizing power. There are many reasons why political conditions and the formation of the vanguard do not mature: including the politics of revolutionary organisations being unsuited to new realities.

But the overemphasis on leadership leads to a belief that it can be transplanted on top of the class struggle. Parallel to this is the sectarianism that often characterises the left. So many organisations have failed because they have put building themselves above building the struggle. The problem of leadership is, as one Italian comrade put it, 'not to PUT yourself at the head of the masses but to BE the head of the masses' This is only possible when revolutionary politics comes from inside the development of the struggle. If politics is seen as something coming solely from 'outside' and programmes are worked out by application of external formulas derived from the 1930s, the left can never end its isolation.

The seeds of communism are often present in the daily battles people wage: it is for us to organise, develop and make them conscious. We must be prepared to LEARN AS WELL AS TEACH It is also worth saying that elitist attitudes on leadership are part of the reasons why there has so often been authoritarian relations between party and class and degenerations of revolutionary processes.

4. Need and desire are not sufficient conditions for the formation of the party The revolutionary party cannot be 'announced' when an organisation reaches a magic figure of members. The party must be the summit of the growth of the autonomy of the working class movement. It must be a product of the real development of the mass struggle and the needs of the vanguards that lead and emerge from that situation. No organisation in Britain today has earned the right to call itself 'the revolutionary party'. Nor could they. The maturity of political conditions has not been reached. The role of the revolutionary organisation in this period is to stimulate the kind of mass struggle that can make a decisive break with reformism and sectionalism.

NOTE:- The above was written 3 years ago. There has been no better single statement of BF's views on Party and Class but there has been a lot of debate since then stimulated at first by the collapse of our 'sister' organisation Lotts Continua in Italy and more recently by the publication of 'Beyond the Fragments'

FURTHER READING

Big Flame publications

The Draft Manifesto for a New Revolutionary Organisation and the Revolution Unfinished: a Critique of Trotskyism (both referred to earlier) contain a lot that is relevant to this issue.

Revolutionary Socialism issues contain a number of relevant articles

No 2 - 1968 - Ten years on; Black Autonomy, The I.S Tradition.

No 3 - on events in Italy

No 4 - on local organising

No 5 - The Crisis of the Revolutionary Left in Europe, Feminism and the Socialist Alternative.

Other useful reading

BEYOND THE FRAGMENTS - FEMINISM AND THE MAKING OF SOCIALISM - written by 3 feminists, one of whom is in Big Flame, its a thorough critique of the left's failure to relate to people, particularly women, and to build a mass base for socialism. In particular it argues that the dominant 'Leninist' tradition on the revolutionary left has much to learn from the practice of the women's movement. It would be fair to say that Big Flame has welcomed the publication of this book and given a general endorsement to the views expressed.

Also worth a mention is the Red Notes pamphlet Living with an Earthquake which is factually excellent on the crisis of the Italian revolutionary left (though politically has a tendency to glamourise the 'movement' in opposition to the party. 15