

"WHAT IS A BIG FLAME GROUP?"

East London Big Flame.

Section one : Notes on the struggle against work, working class autonomy, the social factory.

Section two : Womens autonomy.

Section three : Characteristics of class struggle in Britain in the recent period.

Section four : Autonomy and Fordworkers, notes on the mining community.

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Section six : Implications for organisation.

Content of the class struggle

The struggle against wage labour is as old as the working class. And from Marx - "trade unions should inscribe on their banners the revolutionary watchword 'abolition of the wages system', to Lotta Continua, among other groups in Italy, - "The essential point is thus to rediscover Marxism as the theory of the abolition of wage labour; as such it is the practical-theoretical key to analyse the problem of work and the meaning of communism. Up to now we have not developed it sufficiently." L.C. Nov 18, 19, 1972 - communists have tried to define wage labour in order to abolish it, and build a communist society.

Abstract labour

With Taylorism and Fordism being used in all sectors, and being refined internationally, abstract labour has been pushed to its fullest historical development. Abstract labour is "labour, pure and simple . . . indifferent to its specificity (but capable of all specificities) . . . it has no interest for him (her) as such, but only in as much as it is in fact labour and as such a use value for capital." (i.e. can be an (unpaid) housewife one day, a paid clerk the next, an electronics assembler the day after, and doesn't give a shit about what job, as long as the needed money comes in.)

This economic relation, the character which capitalist and worker have as extremes of a single relation of production - therefore develops more purely and adequately in proportion as labour loses all the characteristics of art; as its particular skill becomes something more abstract and irrelevant.. (Grundrisse p297 Penguin).

Abstract labour is the labour of the mass worker, the figure at the centre of the political struggle against capital in the last period, whether he or she is a wageless worker in Palestine, Northern Ireland, a housewife, or a Ford lineworker. In the Grundrisse Marx outlines the effect of (capitalist) technology on the worker, and thus clarifies further the material basis for the struggle against work - "The worker's activity, reduced to a mere abstraction of activity, is determined and regulated on all sides by the movement of machinery, and not the opposite." (Grundrisse pp 693-5). Further - "The increase of the productive force of labour and the greatest possible negation of necessary labour is the necessary tendency of capital, as we have seen. The transformation of the means of labour into machinery is the realisation of this tendency. In machinery, objectified labour materially confronts living labour as a ruling power . . ."

Deskilling further dehumanises the worker, as well as breaking the power skilled workers have over production: - "The accumulation of knowledge and of skill, of the general productive forces of the social brain, is thus absorbed into capital, as opposed to labour, and hence appears more as an attribute of capital and more specifically as fixed capital (machinery) . . ." The workers knowledge is stripped away and "appears as alien, external to him."

In Britain the struggle against work is well developed, has a long and honourable tradition. It has also intensified in recent years with the re-composition of the working class through the use of techniques of mass production. The struggle against work lies behind the present international crisis as the significant factor and in both Britain and Italy, the acuteness of the crisis originates in the intensity of this struggle.

The increase in output per manhour in British manufacturing was almost the lowest for any industrial country over the decade 1959-69, while hourly earnings in the second half of the decade rose faster than elsewhere. The figures for output and costs in the motor industry for 1972-3 are even more revealing, showing how productivity fell and labour costs rose over 20% in the period. The struggle of miners and dockers also clearly reveals the struggle against work, and it is more and more an essential feature of the offensive of service and white-collar workers.

But what is also an essential task is to see also just how the struggle in the community, and the struggle of women against housework also pose the abolition of wage labour. With over 30% of housing in Britain publicly owned, and the recent Tory offensive against both workplace and community with the IR Act and the Housing Finance Act and inflation, the community is revealed as a critical part of the social factory.

## The need for a new politics.

However, while the actual content of working class struggle is against wage labour, against production and the organisation of production, the (self) consciousness of this does not always match it. The tradition of social democracy, however left-wing, has long been strong in Britain and still remains as the only political articulation of working-class needs (when in fact it no longer is.) Especially when it gets a new paint job (IS etc.) it still has some bases in the composition of the class in some sectors (skilled workers and workers control), but this has increasingly disappeared.

What is absent is the political articulation of the struggle against work. While many individuals or small groups of workers might understand their struggle against work in a more or less articulate manner, the development of this, the real communist movement can be greatly aided by a group like ours. In fact, our responsibility becomes a heavy one, as one of the few revolutionary groups that has even started to define the ~~problem~~ problem, let alone develop a political articulation of working class struggle. Our future as a part of the emerging communist movement will remain in question until we seriously tackle this problem, for if we don't, we are bound to end up, as a group, with the assortment of left-wing social-democrat organisations - I.S., C.P. etc.

There are further questions posed by the crisis. If we are becoming clearer on who is causing the crisis, we must also become clearer on how capital is using it to restructure; and to force the working class to work. Wilson's attack on the BLMC Cowley workers is the most recent and interesting example. While we know how Ford workers are reacting to crisis-mongering, we don't have a good idea of the working class response in other industrial and non-industrial sectors. (London dockers, faced with the biggest and even final threat to their jobs, have just refused a 30% wage increase tied to productivity.) We also need to know how workers are reacting to attempts at recuperation. e.g. BLMC National Assembly of Stewards. Reg Freeson's Housing co-operatives. We need to clear up the question of the workers use of nationalisation.

## Working class autonomy.

To the extent that there has been discussion of autonomy in BF it has revolved around two points:

1. autonomy from capitalist development as in wage drift, miners wage offensive, demands for guaranteed pay, in workplace and outside (claimants, women);
2. autonomy from capitalist institutions, state, local government bodies, social work agencies, unions, tenants associations, the family. Although we haven't looked closely enough at how working class people use the unions etc. tactically, while maintaining autonomy, or in other situation just how the struggle is organised.

We all recognise the need to develop these two points further.

However, there is a third aspect that we haven't seriously considered, and in some ways it is more important for our discussion on organisation. This concerns the question of autonomy, separate organisation, and the power relations within the class.

We have to look very closely at how capital divides the working class and how it rules through these divisions, before we can understand the process of working class unification, how it is taking shape both now and in the future. This is something that must be done at a very local level, say departmental in a plant, or between squatters and council tenants (e.g. Sumner House) as much as the general social level. We cannot be sure of our particular role as a revolutionary group until we are more clear on this.

## Hierarchy of labour and wages

"Manufacture . . . develops a hierarchy of labour powers, to which there corresponds a scale of wages. If, on the one hand, the individual labourers are appropriated and annexed for life by a limited function; on the other hand the various operations of the hierarchy are parcelled out among the labourers according to both their natural and acquired capabilities." Vol I Capital.

It is this hierarchical division of labour that racism, sexism and ageism and against nationalities, language groups are attached. Used as mortar between bricks, keeping the bricks apart and capital's house upright.

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The strike of Asian workers, mostly women, at Imperial Typewriters revealed the explosive power relations within the working class. Their specific exploitation - doing the same jobs as whites while getting less money through fiddled bonuses - was the <sup>material</sup> ~~material~~ basis for their autonomous struggle. Apart from winning their demands ~~xxxxxx~~ over money and representation (Asian shopstewards) they also established power, "won respect", however grudging, from other workers. It was, furthermore, a fight of a relatively powerless community, not merely a workforce, and had within it the contradictions between men and women that run very strong in Asian communities. In other strikes of Asian workers a major demand has been the opening up of better paid jobs for workers locked onto a low rung of the wage and labour power hierarchy.

The wage relation that matches the hierarchy of labour is also a power relation between capital and the working class. And the hierarchy of wages or lack of wages (housewives) reflects power relations within the working class, wherein the more powerful sections of the class exercise power over other sectors as well as capital. It is this relationship between the powerful and relatively powerless that is the key problem in the unification of the class. This pattern of power, and how it has to change, as the least powerful sections begin autonomous struggle, is as discernable in the mining community as it is at Imperials. It has taken some time for the miners themselves to come together, overcoming the divisions of regions, pits, face and surface workers, skilled vs unskilled; yet one of the real lessons of the recent strikes is the development among miners wives (and children) of autonomous organisation, something that was resisted by some miners and certainly many lodges. Yet the miners wives were not able to push through a set of autonomous demands.

The struggle of women, immigrants/ blacks, gay people and other sectors have had to develop autonomously of the most powerful sectors of the class in order to develop their power and therefore also working class power. For as long as large sectors of the class are powerless, the distortion of the power of the most powerful sectors will be maintained, and unification of the class against capital held back.

Only women or immigrants (for example) have a direct interest in analysing their specific relation to capital and the way to struggle to destroy that relation. Male workers at Lesneys, or white workers at Imperial did not begin the fight for the women assembly lineworkers or machine operators. But they have begun to be changed by the women fighting for themselves. At Dagenham, this is a process that is already well-developed - where black workers have established their power, and constantly use it. In many ways, inside the plants, the power relations have radically altered, although outside the factory black workers find themselves in a less powerful position vis a vis the white working class. The process of unification inside the factory has gone a long way among lineworkers in particular, while in the social factory as a whole it is still very young, and a much more complicated process.

The position of women at the bottom of the hierarchical division of labour, (a position that is hidden because women's labour in the home is wageless) means that women's autonomous organisation and demands pose even more basic questions of the unification of the working class than at Fords. The experience of women organising within the Lincoln Estate Food Co-op - the problems of inflation, collectivisation of housework and childcare - and further the question of doing less domestic work, being less tied to it, and getting much more free time.

As there is a hierarchy of power relations among workers within the factory, there is also a hierarchy within the council estates (e.g. tenants over squatters, men over women, and both over kids). The latter is reflected in both the increasing violence in schools, and the development of schoolkids demands and action against schooling.

The autonomous struggles of gay people - oppressed both in the <sup>workplace</sup> ~~xxxxxx~~ and outside it if they openly express their own sexuality - have been central in defining the general content of the struggle against sex roles, the sexual division of labour, and the hierarchy of labour within the family. Gay women in particular - with no vested interest in the role of motherhood - have been central in defining the content of the autonomous struggles of women as a whole.

Finally, this hierarchy of labour-powers is organised internationally by capital. The fight against it in Africa for example (Angola, Mozambique, Rhodesia, South Africa), has had important repercussions for the working class of Europe and America (Portugal, and the Palestinian struggle spilling into Britain and America via the oil crisis).

Autonomy in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales poses in Britain the questions that autonomy in African states, and the mid-East does for the international working-class - the question of the international revolution.

## II

AUTONOMOUS STRUGGLES OF WOMEN

When we talk about autonomous struggles fought by women, we mean those organised struggles where women challenge capitalist definitions of their part in the production process, and in doing so challenge the wage relations between capital and workers. We see that because women get so little out of the wage relation (ie. half the work we do is unpaid the other half low paid) we are among the first to be able to make demands that break through it: the unsupported mothers in the Claimants' Union, and the Family Allowance campaign, demanding a guaranteed independent allowance for women. Because women do two jobs, their struggles often generalize issues from both, and so they work towards the unification of the working class.

In the last few years there has been an upsurge in these struggles - women at Ford's Dagenham refusing to be low-paid because of their sex, nightcleaners organising themselves for the first time, women in Ireland fighting the British troops, the nurses refusing to be low paid because their work is women's 'caring' work, the women in Kirkby spending their rent money on the family, thousands of women in London in particular leaving their husbands and occupying houses... all these struggles are the beginning of women's potential power to fight for and get what we need.

These struggles, together with the growth of the Womens' Liberation Movement have radically affected both the nature and the content of the class struggle in Britain.

CHANGES IN WOMENS' PRODUCTIVE ROLE

This sudden strength and importance of women's struggles must be seen in the context of specific changes in the productive role of women since the war, but also against the background history of women's revolt and organisation going back over hundreds of years.

Women have been sold the biggest productivity deal of all time - they now do two jobs, one in the home and one out - and they only get paid for one. Since the Second World War, the number of married women going out to work has increased by 15%. Women's work in the home has been rationalized and mechanized so that we now do the same amount of work - the same basic chores of working cleaning shopping - in only a fraction of the time it used to take.

Now, in the current crisis, one wage is no longer enough to bring up a family on, so women are forced to sell their labour on the labour market too, where capital treats us as a huge reserve army of labour that can be pushed in and out of work as required, because our 'real' palce is in the home.

In the post-war boom, the expansion of British industry created a demand for labour which had to be met to a large extent by women. In particular, the wage struggles of male workers meant that a source of cheap labour was needed for under-capitalised labour-intensive industries and services: women and immigrants became this source.

Britain's role as an international financial and imperialist power required an enormous secretarial and clerical work force; the expansion of social services and welfare created a demand for hospital workers, teachers, social workers. Even the universities, the civil service, the BBC had to start recruiting women. Women mainly from middle or upper-working class backgrounds who went into these jobs were sold an ideology of emancipation and equality, and in fact were often 'equally' educated to prepare themselves for these 'carrers'. It didn't take long for women to realise that this was a con; that the work was shitwork like any other, no prospects, and that they were working for pay and under conditions that white male workers had rejected years ago. Then, after the education, and a year or two at a career, the drudgery of housework and the mind-destroying loneliness of bringing up kids in a nuclear family situation. Out of this experience was born the Womens Liberation Movement.

When we look at the jobs women do on the labour market, we see that they are mainly the same jobs that women do at home - cleaning sewing, making toys, producing food, and, above all, 'looking after' and 'caring'. Only now our labour has been socialised and rationalised and is, as a consequence, hundreds of times more productive. For example, in the olden days a woman might have spent a whole afternoon making and baking a pie. Now she goes into the factory, produces perhaps a hundred pies, and on her way home from work picks up a pie from the supermarket and pops it in the oven for the family. (Consumption of convenience foods has increased by 25% over the last 10 years, whereas consumption of all foods has increased by 5%)

## The social factory

The changes that advanced capitalism has undergone are related to its dynamic of expansion and the function the class struggle has within this. For capital, the working class is always mere labour power, and as such its aim has been to integrate it more and more into capitalist development and growth. For the class to struggle as a class means precisely to resist such integration. In its counter-attacks, capital responds by re-structuring, and changing the form of its domination; to meet the challenge of the class as a political force, capital reconstituted itself into "collective capital", extending its domination beyond the factory, into society, via the state. Capitalist production has been increasingly socialised, that is, it has invaded areas of social life which were virtually free of its direct control, i.e. the family, schools, social services, leisure, etc. This process is ultimately a shift towards productivity at the social level (see Marx on the collective labourer and productive labour, Capital Ch. 16 Vol. I) - that is, the capitalist relation of production dominating more and more aspects of human activity, integrating them into the process of value-creation. This means an increasingly more organic relationship between production and the rest of society, between factory and society - the social factory.

It is no longer possible to think in terms of the industrial working class alone, when the entire society is being organised productively, that is, in function of the overall goals of social capital. This means that the terrain on which a struggle against capital can be made is greatly extended, the student movement (the recent grants offensive), the women's movement, the immigrant movement, revolt among teachers and white-collar workers, are all struggles against the capitalist organisation of daily life as work. The socialisation of production lays the material basis for socialisation of the class struggle; within the social factory it is possible for the class to attack capital from many different angles and ways, each one of which strengthens the class as a whole.

At the moment, as the Labour government pleads and threatens about the wage offensive, different sections of the class press on, both in the workplace, over the wage, and outside, over the "social wage" (Healey's term - he says its worth £19 a week). And appropriation, squatting, etc, backs up struggles against exploitation in the workplace, making it less possible for capital to recoup in the community what it has lost in the workplace. Thus we see the significance of the social contract (and thus the need for its defeat) as an attempt to bind even tighter together factory and community, along the lines of the new balance of power between the class and capital. (Bennery, etc.)

These areas of commodity production and servicing which were formerly carried out within the home and have now been socialised, are now also areas in which surplus value is extracted directly (the indirect extraction of surplus value through the labour power which women produce and service is still maintained). So, the new power which women are beginning to yield is in large part a consequence of this enormously expanded productivity of women, and the contradiction between this enormous productivity expected of women and the narrowness of the prospects open to us.

#### WOMEN AND THE SOCIAL FACTORY

In Britain, more than any country in the world (except perhaps Russia) capitalism has been forced by working class struggle to involve the working class in capitalist development not only through the changed use of the wage and collective bargaining, but also through tying working class aspirations for a greater social wealth and social justice to capitalist development - its tool being the Welfare State.

But although the Welfare State has contributed to some negative aspects of class struggle (privatisation and individualisation of social needs) it is essentially the result of working class victory, and has created the space for certain kinds of consciousness and struggle to develop. In particular it has created the space for women and children to develop away from their families. Better housing, health care, and contraception, means that women have had fewer kids, and social security and welfare benefits have given women with families at least some slight chance of independence.

As the social factory has increasingly taken responsibility for the areas of social life which formerly were the sole responsibility of women at home, it has lifted a lot of the intense daily emotional and physical pressure from women, and given them the space to make a more critical assessment of their role in society. But now that the welfare services, like the whole of capitalist society, are in crisis, more of the old pressures are coming back - increased bureaucracy to get benefits, half of them have disappeared (school meals, free dental treatment, prescriptions etc.), and the hospitals and schools become more like factories and factory-line production (the number of induced births in hospitals has shot up in the last few months). The deterioration of these services that women have to deal with and work in, means that women are organising and fighting back both inside and outside the institutions - these struggles (rent strikes, occupations, Claimants Unions, nurses, and cleaners strikes, teachers and school kids' strikes) are all posing the politicisation of working class struggle - widening the wage struggle to social demands that are beginning to demand changes in all the social relationships determined by the capitalist form of production. For example nurses demanding support from the miners, and that they are entitled to the same sort of wage.

#### AUTONOMOUS CONTENT OF WOMENS' STRUGGLES

Almost all women's struggles have an autonomous content, because women cannot begin to struggle without challenging the capitalist hierarchy of labour power which keeps us in a subordinate position. Women organizing collective childcare or collective shopping, or fighting for decent housing or more amenities, are fighting to reduce the burden of their unwaged work. Women organising for more money or security at work have to confront the bosses' use of them as a low paid reserve army of labour; women resist productivity by fighting for 'shopping time' off, or longer tea breaks, or simply taking days off. Often they fight for more money as a way of working less. For these reasons, women's struggles tend to have a direct anti-capitalist nature:

\* Any struggle that women get involved in, inevitably raises wider issues. Often women have to challenge the sexism of their husbands in order to be able to organize at all, or they have to organize collective childcare so they can get to meetings and go on pickets. For example during the rent strike on Tower Hill, Kirkby, the women had to challenge their husbands and the male-dominated Action Group in order to make their own demands. Having won the liberty and free time after a hard battle, after the rent strike was over they continued to look for ways of organising together around community issues, and trying to set up a playgroup so they could get time away from their kids.

\* Women are often less bound by loyalty to reformist organisations like the TUs (which have, on the whole, gladly cooperated with capital

in keeping women at the bottom of the labour hierarchy). The hospital workers strikes had to challenge the backwardness of the unions, the women at Imperial Typewriters had to challenge both the sexism and the racism of the union.

\* Women's lack of tradition and strength in organising means that they often find themselves in a position where they cannot win on their own, and so they have to challenge the sectionalism of the white male working class, and demand their support in their struggles, (a support which is often not forthcoming). Both the nurses in asking for the support of the miners, and the women at SEI in demanding the support of the men there, were demanding class solidarity and unity, which in the second case, the men were too sectionally conscious to consider.

\* Without the organisation of women in the community, many male workers' strikes could not be maintained: the miner's wives, for example, were crucial in maintaining the strike. At Birdseye in Kirkby in 1972, when men were sacked for attending a rents demonstration, women picketed the plant until they were reinstated. Women, both in their own struggles and in the support they give to other struggles, bridge the gaps between community and workplace, and workplace and workplace.

\* Women's struggles have been crucial in linking different sections of the working class; women from women's liberation worked with night-cleaners on the nightcleaners' campaign. In Islington, playgroup leaders are working with parents to pressure the council to provide more play facilities.

\* Women, excluded from the traditional strength of point-of-production struggles, are infinitely inventive in new tactics: sit-ins and occupations, roadblocks and diverting traffic, dumping rubbish on the council steps, dumping kids in the SS office, and various kinds of symbolic protest, from suffragettes chaining themselves to railings, to disrupting the Miss World contest. Because many of the things women organise around have never been considered important by the white male working class, women are having to develop new ways of fighting and organising all the time, and of finding ways of exerting power other than directly economic power.

#### THE UNSUPPORTED MOTHERS CAMPAIGN

The unsupported mothers' campaign is a good example of how an autonomous women's struggle can lead into many other areas of confrontation. Some of us, who were involved in the unsupported mothers campaign, came to see it as a political expression of the autonomy of women which raised many fundamental issues for us. We came to see ourselves as part of the emerging proletariat, ex-students who found ourselves with children to bring up and no means of support except social security. Through the women's movement many of us had a strong sense of feminist struggle, women's need for economic independence from men, and support from other women to assert ourselves in male-dominated society. We chose to live on social security for the same reason as the majority of unsupported mothers - so we didn't have to depend on men for support. It was through our struggle for a living as unsupported mothers that we could develop a clear feminist analysis of women's struggle against capital, because the situation of unsupported mothers represents women's real relation to wage labour, ie. the worker only has the 'right' to a living income as long as he/she enters into a contract with the capitalist to work for so many hours under the complete control of that capitalist. Women enter into a contract, the marriage contract, and as long as she fulfills the terms of that contract, to produce and reproduce labour power, to labour an indefinite number of hours, to produce this particular commodity - she has the 'right' to a secure living. As soon as this labour power ceases to be productive ie. becomes unemployed, or as soon as she ceases to produce it, ie. she gets out, she is no longer fulfilling the terms of the contract, and she no longer has the right to a secure living.

This is where we disagreed with wages for housework. We were demanding a guaranteed income for unsupported mothers and for all women - we were posing the abolition of the whole wage relation ie. we should get a secure living regardless of our productivity. We were posing a communist perspective - that we get an income according to our needs, not according to how productive we are.

Unsupported mothers already had the experience of being paid for the work we do. In return for the money we get off social security the state assumes the right to make sure we're doing the job efficiently, and sends round social workers, health visitors etc. to check



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that we're bringing the kids up properly and not rearing little vandals instead of future productive workers.

The unsupported mothers campaign was started by ex-students women with children, working through the CU. It quickly became a focus for hundreds of working class unsupported mothers fighting for an income for themselves unrelated to production. They formed groups to support each other going to the SS offices so they could no longer be intimidated by the bureaucrats and shared all the knowledge and experience they had gained from dealing with the SS. so they could no longer be divided up and treated as individual 'problems'. Later on they launched the campaign against the co-habitation law, exposing it to ridicule by such tactics as parading outside Barbara Castle's home early in the morning, disguised as 'snoopers' complete with white raincoats and false noses. Aware of our own lack of strength, we looked around to the Trade Union movement for support, but were generally ridiculed. (A Fords shop steward said, when we asked for support on a May Day march, 'Look I've just been down at FOrds getting 10,000 workers out on strike' - don't talk to me about unsupported mothers and claimants') However the building workers, maybe because they were locally based or maybe just because they have more experience of hassling with the SS, supported us in coming down to the SS, and fought as hard for the women's claims as they did for their own.

For women in the CUs, a prerequisite for being able to organise at all was time and self-confidence. This meant that we had to support each other in all areas of our lives -arranging abortions, threatening to beat up stropky husbands, helping women who had walked out on their husbands to squat and to fight evictions, looking after other women's kids for weeks on end, organising playgroups and creches so we would have time to ourselves away from the kids, visiting each other in hospital, fighting doctors, organising camping holidays and dances to give us a bit of pleasure and a taste of things to come, putting a lot of time into sorting out personal problems some women decided to be gay because they found so much love and support from each other rather than from men. The everyday organisation of our lives was not simply the background for the 'real' struggle - it was the revolution of our everyday lives, organising together collectively instead of struggling on in isolation, building a solidarity that meant we dared to win.

The unsupported mothers' campaign taught us to recognise the productive work women do in looking after kids; but our fight was not to be paid for that work, but for money to live on as a right. This was something we found we could only fight for by organising together as women, and by carrying our struggle into other areas - the unions, housing, playgroups, as the need arose.

#### ORGANISATIONAL AUTONOMY OF WOMEN

One thing this means for us as women in BF is that we see we have to be rooted in struggles to be able to generalise from them. We don't see we can understand the real autonomous content of struggles simply by standing at factory gates.

These questions of political autonomy inevitably raise the questions of organisational autonomy too. Because women's struggles are also against the sectionalism and reformism of the white male working class, they cannot easily be subsumed into their organisations. In particular women need to challenge the sexism of men who collaborate with the ruling class in maintaining the subordinate position of women.

Only by organising autonomously, determining our own goals of struggle, our own priorities, and our own tactics, can we fight towards a position of equality, which is the starting point for the class unification of men and women.

As part of this process, we feel it is important for women from all BF groups to meet to have discussions, gathering information and building up a picture to help us to analyse the class struggle of women. We think that the Women's Commission could be a vehicle for working out a general feminist politics (we have suggested that it meets less often but for longer sessions, so that real political discussion can take place.)

We feel that our links with the WLM are important, as this movement, for all its faults, represents one aspect of the autonomous struggle of women, and to cut ourselves off from this on sectarian grounds would be disastrous. We feel that the autonomous perspective we are developing could have a significant role in the development of the WLM, but for this to happen, women inside BF must also be genuinely autonomous, not only in developing our own politics, but in helping to determine the political direction of BF. As a precondition for this there must be a general recognition throughout BF of women as a section of the working class who have shown themselves to quite advanced in autonomous struggle. This understanding must be allowed to shape and determine BF's politics; it isn't enough to add a few women's demands to an essentially male industrial programme, or to raise moral objections to sexism as something that 'holds back the class struggle'. The struggle against sexism is the class struggle, as waged by one section of the class. We do not feel it is politically correct or useful, therefore, for women to be answerable to a male-dominated central committee, until the politics of the whole organisation are genuinely feminist politics.

# CHARACTERISTICS OF WORKING CLASS AUTONOMY IN THE RECENT PERIOD

## Introduction

We need to regain a sense of the strength of working class autonomy in Britain (and the world) in this period. What is called by the bosses "the crisis" is for us a further stage in the developing confrontation between capital and the working class. It is not a special or freak event, or merely the result of the economic contradictions of capital. The bourgeois press makes this more and more clear. At the centre of the bosses' crisis is the working class. We need to identify closely the ways in which working class power has been developing. The following list of characteristics is not complete, but offers some guidelines in understanding the nature of the struggle. It has to be seen in the context of an almost irreversible refusal of work and struggle against productivity in all developed countries, and the powerful if sometimes contradictory struggles of the third world working class. The list reflects, significantly, the increasing resistance to the hierarchical division of labour. Out of this we get a clear picture of a strong, confident working class, that is in many ways on the attack.

In Britain we see:

1. The massification of demands - e.g. the spreading of the demand for London weighting - for teachers, white-collar, local manual, etc etc. Also the £10 interim demand in Scotland. Use of miner's wage agreement in current nationalised industry wage-bargaining.
2. The egalitarianism of demands - e.g. miners demand for a national bonus rather than the faceworkers' productivity deal; the fight for equal pay - Bristol; SEI; Lesneys; Fords; the general concern about low-paid workers; (e.g. hospital workers); across the board demands - like £10 for all Scottish teachers demanding the highest increase for new teachers against the Houghton report; nurses demanding largest increases for student nurses; etc.
3. The struggle against productivity - e.g. miners, carworkers; also struggles of women against unpaid work (see below).
4. The radicalisation and organisation of white-collar workers - e.g. civil service, BBC; a high proportion of these workers are women. White-collar workers increasingly recognising themselves as part of the W/C.
5. The breakdown of capital's attempt to get into cheap labour areas - e.g. the continuing high level of struggle in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland; (obviously this is true internationally as well).
6. The spreading of cycles of struggle - e.g. the spreading of tactics, sit-ins, flying pickets; also the spreading of struggles in line with capital's attempt to re-structure itself - refinery workers; oil lorry drivers; textile workers. The spreading of demands - miner's wash-up.
7. The continuing fight against inflation - huge resistance to drop in living standards, big wages push since Phase 3 was smashed and Tories kicked out. See also appropriation struggles below.
8. Continuing struggles against unemployment, redundancies, lay-offs; capital's flexibility in restructuring is reduced; government is forced to maintain commitment to full-employment.
9. Mobility and violence of struggle - flying pickets; Imperial pickets.
10. Continuing rigidity and restrictions which the working-class is able to maintain and impose - e.g. in the shipping industry craft restrictions and refusal of work in the change-over from shipbuilding to oil-rigs.
11. Resistance by immigrants to any form of repatriation or control of aliens. This greatly increases confidence of immigrant workers compared to e.g. Germany.
12. Workers use of mobility (refusing low wages and bad conditions by moving) to force up wage rates in areas of labour shortage - e.g. Midlands skilled

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engineering, London Transport and service sectors, teaching, nursing, mines, et al (hospitals, agency clerical workers)

13 The refusal by workers in nationalised industries to act as the focal point of state sector incomes planning e.g. hospitals, post office (This has forced the LP into using state sector price increases instead as a leading weapon against the W/C)

14 The use of state job security to refuse work, skive, etc e.g. Glasgow direct labour building workers

16. The increased use of on the job tactics as a way of maintaining control of the struggle vis-as-vis unions, and causing maximum cost to the employers at minimum cost to the workers; e.g. railways work to rule in '72, miners overtime ban

17. Emergence of demands for a guaranteed income from employers e.g. car industry, guaranteed bonus in building industry, etc

18. Rejection of shift work, overtime, unsocial hours - e.g. miners, Ford Halewood and Dunlop ban on Friday nights, Boots in Liverpool, Lesneys pay for shopping, recent nurses wildcats. Women have been at the centre of many of these struggles, which can also be regarded as an aspect of wages for housework (see below)

19 Refusal of women to act as reserve of cheap labour - mushrooming of women's wage demands plus demands for paid nurseries, time to look after sick members of family, have kids etc

20 Emergence of demands for a guaranteed living wage from the state - unemployed, unsupported mothers, O.A.P.s, - expressed in claimants union movement, struggles of disabled.

21 Emerging demands for wages for housework; e.g. family allowance campaign, campaigns for payment for childminding, Cowley wives, Miners wives (see also 19 above) This runs alongside . . .

22 Collectivisation of housework - food co-ops, nurseries, laundrettes, road crossings, playgroups, adventure playgrounds.

23. Emergence of struggles of appropriation - squatting (unofficial), shoplifting, rent strikes and rent arrears, "fiddles" of electricity, gas

24. Against re-organisation and cuts in social expenditure - schools, health service, social services, housebuilding and redevelopment programs. We can expect these struggles to be increasingly important as Healey pits the social wage against the recent gains in real earnings, and increasingly uses state expenditure as a weapon in total incomes planning

25. Against the re-structuring of traditional working class subsidies - i.e. against the loss of benefits from the Empire of cheap food and housing. Rent strikes; food co-ops; housewives use of the prices boards.

26 Struggles against factory learning in schools (refusal of schoolwork); schools strikes, truancy, teacher bashing; also teachers strikes contain this content. (N.B. The reverse process is also at work - use of schools, colleges, F.E. etc to avoid waged work.)

27 Struggles against the use of hospitals, mental hospitals, and prisons as re-servicing stations for inefficient labour-power - e.g. MPU, alternative health centres, hospital workers strikes, prisoners struggles

28. Struggles against the hierarchy of labour in the sexual division of labour - women's and gay movements redefining sex roles; battered wives centres; emergence of new forms of living

29 The fight against the reproduction of labour-power in capital's interest i.e. the fight for women to control their own bodies - e.g. the contraception and abortion campaigns

This list of characteristics inevitably simplifies a complex dialectical process of emerging demands and class unification, in which these separate struggles are continually overlapping. For example, it could be important for us to

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understand in East London why the demand for equal pay emerged as it did at Fords in 1968; what was the organic connection between this struggle and the rent strikes that erupted in East London in the same period; and how it was at Fords that the equal pay strike was a necessary prelude to the first parity strike in the year following, the men being pushed by the women into action.

We need to look particularly closely at the roles that immigrant and migrant workers and women have played in the processes described. We need to learn how sectional organisation develops into general organisation - in factory or community - and to look clearly at the ways in which unification of factory and community struggles can and is taking place.

We felt that it would be useful to look at a couple of examples of recent struggles, to clarify some of these processes of working class autonomy, and to better understand our relation to it.

### Autonomy and Fordworkers

(Documents produced in a steady stream by Big Flame Ford Groups reveal the rich content of Fordworkers struggle - as the struggle against work - which will again be the subject in motor commission papers. What this section will concentrate on then, is how autonomous organisation takes shape at Dagenham, and what this means for our role as an organisation.)

To bolt down his continuous flow system in Dagenham, Henry Ford had to smash the shop stewards organisation that emerged during and after the Second World War. In 1962 seventeen militant stewards were sacked, and from this point on, the location of resistance to Fordism really moved to the shopfloor. Since then, building on a plan developed in the U.S., the unions, including the shop stewards committees, have been much more integrated into the company (and the state in wider society). The gap between the majority of the stewards and the shopfloor proceeded apace, with almost all the initiatives, demands and actions originating on the shopfloor itself. The 1974 contract was broken by the shop floor against the unions. The unions, until it became clear that there was no choice but to go along, wanted to protect the Social Contract, and ensure the re-election of the labour government. However, as more sections acted, Ford management gave in, and the unions were brought in to do the talking.

The increasing number of West Indians at Dagenham through the late 60s and early 70s greatly strengthened shopfloor organisation; for many of them came with the experience of militant union movements that had become Labour parties and ended up as reactionary governments. Their clear sense of what the unions are at Dagenham is based in their position in the hierarchy of labour, their relative exclusion from the cushy, higher-grade jobs (-almost all stewards have cushy jobs). Whereas young white militants are continually being bought off - by getting a kick upstairs from b grade linework to C; grade repair, relief or offline jobs, black militants have remained on the line for years. They remain the most stable and uncompromising part of the internal vanguard. Very stropy young white and Asian militants come and go, but it is the interaction of these groups that throws up the informal sectional organisation of the shopfloor, that organises the struggle against work.

Many black workers have come with the experience of the bottom rungs, the most exploited, in small sweatshops, before coming to Dagenham. Inside Dagenham however, black workers have broken down the old power relations by their initiatives on the shopfloor (e.g. fight against authority and hierarchy) in comparison with the sweatshop experience, they have power, and thus the respect of most of the white workers. However it is the Asians who remain the least powerful group within the plants, although the emergence of young Asian workers as a solid part of the internal vanguard is changing this.

But whereas, inside the plants the process of unification has developed, as the power relations between white, black, and Asian workers has changed outside it is a different matter. And it is because we have chosen, for political reasons to be an outside group, as well as build up inside organisation that this problem concerns us as a central one. The importance of outside -inside organisation does not merely derive from the fact that we are or were only external, but from the need to fight against the social factory, not just the factory-as-Ford. All of which puts us right in the middle (also because we choose to be) of the complicated process of working class unification. Whereas the relations between black, Asian and white militants inside the factory are relatively straightforward, without being finally sorted out, outside Ford they are not. For example, the position of immigrants in relation to the police, housing, schools and services in general is a relatively powerless one, and one that they are struggling around autonomously. Secondly there is the

relationship with political movements in the home country, something which we do not automatically share, but that we must learn to share as part of our political perspective.

The Dagenham situation then, throws open the question of autonomous organisation of different sections of the working class in a most direct manner. While we can see ourselves playing an initiating role, we are not the vanguard, and would not be at <sup>any</sup> kind of vanguard at all if we were to set ourselves up as the vanguard ( we would cut ourselves off from other vanguards)

#### Hidden Face.

Autonomous organisation is a problem that becomes even more highlighted when we "discover" the hidden face of the Ford working class; the wives of Ford workers. This was never an academic question, nor was it ever a peripheral one. The Cowley wives should have ended that political misconception. Yet it remains perhaps the most difficult because the wives of Ford workers are the least powerful section of the Ford organised working class, and up to now have not established their own autonomous demands.

Thus it is no accident that in our agitation and propaganda, we, as a group that is male and external (originally) have centred on internal plant issues; we do not automatically understand or see the significance of the specific relation of Ford wives and immigrant workers to capital as Ford. But the need to understand this and to locate and work with groups of militants from these sections of the class is essential and the most politically challenging for us. It directly challenges any idea of Big Flame as it is now being the fore-runner of the Party. If Dagenham teaches us anything, it must be this, that the linear growth of Big Flame as it is now, will not produce a revolutionary organisation that represents the whole working class rather than just a section of it.

To overcome our relative isolation within the situation we have to understand the need for and existence of autonomy of other sections, and to learn to work within this. There is no easy solution, but until we really get to grips with this problem we will have to continue working as we have - which has been very positive - or we'll succumb to hasty solutions, go it alone as Big Flame the vanguard, or this plus a re-orientation to the union as the stable organisation within the workplace. But to see ourselves as part of the class vanguard that organises around Ford is not to deny our specific role within it. Up to now our role has been:

1. to communicate shopfloor demands and actions, revealing their political nature.
2. to act as a collective memory
3. to become a stable reference point and organisation, a base, which workers can use in a situation of high mobility of labour, something that makes in-plant organisation by itself relatively unstable. Either we provide this or the unions do. (But the unions dont, in the workers interest, in our view)
4. To try to raise social-political issues that arise outside the factory but that directly influence the course of internal struggle. (Inflation, housing, Ireland, etc.)

In addition to this, there is a need within the Dagenham situation, as within the working class as a whole, to provide a political perspective, language, method of analysis, that explains and is derived from the experience of the working class struggle against labour. Up to now we haven't done this with any clarity, because we ourselves haven't been clear enough.

AS Dave Douglas points out in Radical America Vol 8 no. 5, most miners believed that with the 1947 nationalisation "here was a chance to run the pits in a civilised way a chance for workers control and justice" demands

They were sadly disillusioned; but by 1969 were fast developing a whole new set of based on their needs. This time they were not about to be fooled and haven't been up to the time of writing, as another "excessive" wage claim is put in.

In the last five years the miners have re-organised their struggle against work in a rigorous manner. They have refused to bow down to heavy arguments of "working for the national interest". The drive for wages based on need, not on productivity (capitalist development) has been backed up by a resolute refusal of the pits themselves. What has been won by the recent strikes as much as anything, has been 1) In 1972, the refusal to maintain the pits during the strike - "to hell with the pits, we want get the money, we won't work in them", and 2) through 1973, 600 miners leaving the pits every week. Resolute use and development of mass tactics, flying pickets (Saltley) blacking and a prior overtime ban to run down the stocks in 1973 with a strategic sense of their added power in the oil crisis, made the miners unbeatable.

Since the 1974 defeat of the Tory 3 day week tactic, miners have gone on to turn down a productivity deal pushed by the Labour Govt, and to take a record number of days off (up to 20% absenteeism in areas like Wales, Yorkshire) and to go on to demand a wage increase well outside the social contract.

And "Although technology was drastically improved in the late sixties, output per manshift (which is how enthusiasm is measured) has stayed relatively static. In 1970 it stood at 44.1 cwt and the latest figures show output running at 46.7 cwt per manshift" (Sunday Times Dec 15 '74)

However what we don't have an accurate picture of is just how the different sections of miners come together around a common set of demands. It seems that 1969 was a turning point, when an unofficial strike movement swept the coalfields over many different issues. "This strike of 1969 involved 150,000 miners from over 130 collieries, united numerous rank and file papers, journals and unofficial organisations around a common tactic and program of demands" (Douglas). Divisions between pits, regions, between surface and face workers, skilled and unskilled began breaking down, and the demands got clarified, around a central struggle for a great deal more money particularly for lower paid workers. This process of unification was greatly facilitated by the organisation of the mining community and is worth us investigating in detail just how different sections came together and what problems were raised in the process. We have a lot to learn ~~about~~ about the process of class unification from the miners especially on the relation of miners wives to the struggle, and their fight to make their voice heard. Something further we must learn from is the effect the miners have and still have on other sectors. For example, on students as during the strikes they slept ate and drank together in colleges on engineering workers who came to support them at Saltley, and in many different ways since, as their demands and tactics have spun off into almost every other section of workers. And then ask ourselves what can an organisation like ours add to this struggle (presuming we have learnt from it first), what can our role be??

## 1 Against abstract conceptions of organisation

It has always been the strength of Big Flame to recognise the deeply political nature of the demands that are thrown up directly in mass struggle. We have recognised that the "communist movement" is not to be equated with the activities of the left groups, but is to be identified in the daily struggles of the working class against capital's rule.

What we are trying to get away from in this paper is talking about autonomy as though this meant just a different content to the struggle. That is, we retaining traditional left forms of organisation: central committee, branches, Leninist conception of the cadre, a national newspaper expressing the line of the central committee and simply identify a new mass vanguard; replacing "skilled white working class" by women, blacks, young people, de-skilled workers. We fail to recognise that the new content of the struggle thrown up by these sectors poses the question of new forms of organisation.

For us, the question of organisation isn't an 'ideological' one. Nor is it 'merely' a practical one. It is rooted in our understanding of the nature of the class struggle at this time. There has been a lot of writing, particularly from Italy, which showed how the organisational expression of Leninism, democratic centralism, was rooted in the particular nature of the organisation of the skilled workers who provided the majority of the vanguard for revolution and against capitalist development after WW1. We feel that that it is a grave mistake to make of this organisational form, democratic centralism, a principle for all time. (Lenin himself recognised this truth.)

By the same token, we aren't principled federalists either. We have to look closer at the particular nature of the struggles developing, and our own needs within these struggles. To take an example, the growth of the claimants unions. It would be a mistake to see the federal development of the CUs in 1970-71 simply in terms of the ideology of the militants within it. In fact, there were repeated struggles with more centralist tendencies. In the event, the federalists won out for that period because a federal structure was (1) more appropriate to a struggle that was centred round local s.s. offices (2) reflected the need for claimants themselves to be in control of their struggle in an immediate way as they emerged from the passivity that is a function of their role in relation to capital.

In contrast, we say from the miners struggle how, once a process of unification of demands had taken place between pits, miners needed to centralise those demands, through the union, in order to confront the Coal Board with maximum United strength. At the same time, the pits retained great autonomy in their conduct of the struggle; there was a spreading of tactics from pit to pit. After the victory of '72, the pits intensified their grip on the union nationally. In '74 the social contract opened up new divisions and contradictions, and particular low-productivity areas (Yorkshire, Scotland) took the lead in posing new possibilities for unification.

As a political organisation we must be in touch with and understand the complexity of these processes, and possess ourselves a structure that can be responsive to them.

2. Problems and weaknesses in Big Flame in the current period

The political weakness of BF and the lack of clarity on even basic questions makes itself felt as an urgent problem in a number of ways. There is difficulty setting up new groups. The new groups that are set up feel a lack of confidence, they don't feel themselves backed by any clear understanding of the struggles they are engaged in. They feel called upon to express a position in more areas than they feel competent to develop themselves. It becomes hard to know what to do. We feel paralysed for fear of choosing the 'wrong' priorities..

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This lack of confidence can become intensified where a lot of our practise is built around

This lack of confidence can become intensified where a lot of our politics is built around united fronts. We can come to feel that we have to compete with other political groups on their own terms - we feel pushed into the same morass of institutional politics, and don't feel the confidence in our positions that we might if we were more clearly rooted in our mass work. We feel that Big Flame as a whole is weak in the following ways:

(a) lack of a feminist perspective

This is crucial, and a large part of what we feel are the other weaknesses in BF at the moment. It has to do with the numerical majority of men in BF, with sexism and a consistent refusal to take certain types of struggle seriously, with a general failure to understand the notion of autonomy, with a refusal to take our own lives seriously in BF. (i.e. sometimes - to be less serious.) As a consequence, there has been a general stagnation of BF politics. We don't think that - like the IMG - developing a feminist perspective means 'leaving women to deal with women's issues'. It means transforming the politics of BF as a whole.

eg. (1) in situations where there are men and women (like the hospitals, rent strikes, squatting).

In the hospital it's the unwaged condition of the housewife that underpins the low pay for everybody. If we don't understand this we don't understand the basis for the struggles that can be developed. Nor do we confront the question of how in practise the people who are fighting (woman, immigrants) can relate to an organisation of mostly young single people without kids.

(2) within BF it means breaking down the hierarchy of skills. Women are the key to that and therefore to the accessibility of BF to working class people.

Unless BF is clearer about its feminism, not only will we be unable to respond to much of the revolutionary future, but women in the women's movement who are looking for a class perspective will be unable to take us seriously.

(b) tendency to an institutionalised view of the struggle

This weakness expresses itself in a host of ways; for example, in the way that discussions of 'the current situation' express themselves in meetings and at the last conference. We are always strong on the fora of the state offensive, often weak on working-class struggle. Given our dependence for information on the newspapers, this is not surprising. But it also represents ingrained habits of 'defensive thinking' about capitalist development, and a consistent failure to actually put the working-class at the centre of the crisis, even where we say we do.

As an organisation, this perspective of class struggle will continue to dominate unless we put our highest priority on what we learn from our base situations, not what can be garnered from a group of people sitting in a room together having read the newspapers.

Often the working class is presented by the bourgeoisie with a series of false choices - in or out of the Common Market. Rather than being pushed into taking sides in these choices, and analysing them in the bourgeoisie's terms - i.e. which is the best solution for capital at this time? - we must force the ~~rank~~ debate back onto the terrain of the working class; of how restructuring is taking place on a European level - and how the W/C is organising against it. We are not against an overall strategic analysis that deals with ~~various~~ contradictions within the ruling class. But our overall emphasis at this time must be to learn from what is happening in the class.



For example, we have learnt from Fords and Lesneys that the refusal of internal mobility is one of the major strengths of the working class inside those factories. We have come to understand mobility as one of the major issues of the social contract. We could never have understood this issue other than by taking our lead from what was happening in the factories we were close to. This is not to say that we should not pay close attention to what is happening within the Labour Party, but our understanding of the differences must be clearly rooted in an understanding of the workers' offensive the LP is trying to deal with.

This institutionalised view of the struggle also reflects our smallness as a group, our 'immersion' in relatively few struggles as yet, although many for our numbers. It is also reflected in a strange 'objectivity' in much of our published material. Little of the anger that we feel, as workers, house workers or revolutionaries, seems to express itself in what we write. The Merseyside newspaper is curiously detached and 'schoolmasterish'. It rarely reflects the feelings of the people directly in struggle.

(d) weakness in relating to struggles outside the factory

Much of this failure derives from (a), as well as in our weakness in relating to young people in general, and in making the development of a revolutionary culture part of our priority. It must be an immediate priority for us to develop clear understandings and practice in the social factory as a whole.

(c) weakness in relating to struggles of immigrants

At the very least we feel we should give it as much priority as to opening up discussions with black political groups as we do with groups in other countries.

We feel that none of these weaknesses, important though they are, need be a permanent feature of Big Flame. We think that the politics and the practice we have developed so far offers an incredible potential to the revolutionary movement if it is developed in an open and imaginative way. We also feel that to put the major responsibility for the development of our politics on any form of national committee would be to reinforce the existing weaknesses in the politics of Big Flame. Rather than encouraging political discussion and development, we fear that the following would happen:

1. The passivity of a large proportion of BF militants would become institutionalised at the moment in relation to political development would be considerably reinforced.
2. The present political weaknesses of BF would become institutionalised.
3. Particularly the lack of influence of women, working class movements and young people would be reinforced.

Later in this document we present an alternative perspective for the political development of BF that we feel is more in touch with our political needs.

THE QUESTION OF PRIORITIES.

How do we determine our priorities? What kind of analysis do we need for it? The traditional left conception is that the priority is to work where the working class is strongest, where it has the most "power" to intensify the contradiction of capital; it is related to the conception that surplus value is produced only at the "point of production". This view locates the power centres in industry, and not even all of that.

Our analysis of the hierarchy of labour begins to suggest a very different formulation. Struggle made by the "weaker" sections of the class pose more directly the question of class unification, and open the way for the building of revolutionary organisation that really does represent the general class interest. While we say we must work within emerging ~~xxxx~~ struggles in those sectors which pose the possibility ~~xxxx~~ of adding most power to the class, this doesn't mean neglecting the "strong sectors". It's clear that, for example, the miners were able to set an example to the working class in smashing Phase III that other sectors were able to follow. They set an example of class solidarity, making links with students, etc., and later on in their support of the nurses. Their strong economic position gave them the strength to refuse the productivity deal this year, which set an example for others.

The struggles of "weaker" sectors, - often because to be ~~xxx~~ successful they have to choose more radical ~~xxxxxxxx~~ tactics, to look for support from a much wider area, and challenge wider areas of ideology - can be just as threatening, and are

essential to the process of unification, for example the nurses. This becomes particularly important if we recognise that the crisis in Britain is partly generated outside Britain by the worldwide proletariat.

#### Why Fords?

In the Ford group we weren't totally clear about this at first. In the particular case of Fords, it's important to see that Fords' key role in the economy, as an exporter and regulator of the economic cycle, was connected with its other roles: as a leader in advanced assembly line production; as an employer of immigrant labour; and as the major employer in East London, setting the pace ~~for~~ ~~for~~ other employers. Our choice to work at Fords, then, had to do with our understanding of the contradictions of the mass worker who could be seen as a potential mass vanguard. This definition of priorities came firstly for us out of the conditions of production and the role of immigrant labour at Fords. Only secondarily was this a function of Fords' role in the economy as a whole. We can compare this with the Trotskyist analysis of wage drift, which in the same period defined skilled workers in the engineering industry as the "strongest sector", which posed most threat to the economy. This analysis failed to see that the conditions of production and the form of the hierarchy of labour in the factory - skilled/unskilled - is exactly what has led to the recent period of relative stagnation of struggle in the engineering industry.

#### Womens' Struggles

Womens' struggles, particularly in the community, are neglected by any discussion of ~~priority~~ priorities that doesn't recognise womens' role in the hierarchy of labour. We have seen from Tower Hill how it was the women that were best able to raise the question of support from other sectors; unity of the estate itself; questions of collective childcare. We are beginning to understand from Lesneys how womens' power in the factory is inseparable from the power she is able to gain in the home, even to have time to come to meetings. This is why we reject any form of factoryism, even when we work round factories. Our priority is still to understand the process by which factory and community struggles can be unified, and how women in particular will be the agents of that process. In particular it means recognising how the demands for less work and more pay (or more collective work) in the home is wedded to the demand for more pay and less work in the factory. At this time women are experiencing the contradictions of capitalism most acutely - the effects of the crisis are higher prices, a reduction of social and welfare services, & loss of jobs, especially part-time. What this means is that, for example, married women with school-aged kids find it financially necessary to take paid jobs just when the situation in the schools is so bad that teacher shortage forces part-time schooling. Just when they have most need to go out to work, they have no-one to look after the kids. The struggle of women in the home has to be a priority for all of us.

#### WHAT IS THE WORKING CLASS?

Most of us in BF first became radicalised through the womens' or students' movements. As students we became alienated from an education that was increasingly tailored to slot us into capital's technological and managerial revolution; in the late '60s we began rejecting factory conditions and factory learning training us to be specialised labour-power. As women we discovered a dual contradiction; between the equality of opportunity we had been led to believe in, and the actual jobs we were offered; between our 'freedom' as waged workers; and our subservient role as housewives or 'revolutionary girlfriends'. This experience has led us to question old definitions of the working class which saw the vanguard in the white male factory worker and saw students as by definition petty-bourgeois. - It forced us to recognise the validity of our own autonomous struggles, and to see them as anti-capitalist. It meant we had to make a much more specific analysis of the role of different sectors in the process of expropriation of surplus value. It meant recognising the specific role of, say, the education system in providing certain forms of labour for capital, and helping to structure the divisions between different strata in the hierarchy of labour.

It also means recognising the different roles of different sectors at different times in relation to capital. In Britain the role of women as a reserve army of labour has been increasingly added to their role as producers and reproducers of labour-power since the '50s. In Italy, the unemployed of the South have recently ceased to be regarded as a reserve army of labour for Italian capital. They have proved too volatile. Increasingly this role has been passed to women and to the 3rd world proletariat, and also to workers in the state capitalist countries in Eastern Europe.

This leads us to two conclusions:

(1) For us in BF, the question of 'what is the working class' isn't a once and for all question, but one to be asked all the time in relation to the changing strategy of capital.

(2) Our own origin as revolutionaries in the mass vanguards of '68-'69 leads us to different conceptions of the formation of the party and of ourselves as revolutionary cadres.

No longer can we see ourselves, as Lenin could, as totally external to the process of proletarianisation; or as bringing politics to an inherently economic struggle.

Our renewed concept of the cadre in BF becomes:

- someone who recognises the need and is willing to consistently organise in the mass struggles of our period, and is willing to learn from others in those struggles.
- someone who wants to develop her or his political understanding in a situation in which she/he is struggling, in relation to the struggle for communism.
- someone who is conscious of her/his own needs and of the changes he/she needs to make to revolutionize her/his consciousness and everyday life. e.g. contradictions of job roles; relationship with kids etc.

#### A NOTE ON ARMED STRUGGLE AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GROUPS

In the long run we're in favour of some idea of the party. As the class struggle develops the W/C will be faced with the question of state power and armed struggle. These in turn will pose questions of military organisation, a question which can't be avoided. On the other hand, the realisation of this ~~question~~ question is not sufficient to justify one sect or another setting itself up as necessary to lead the struggle.

We cannot model ourselves on groups which have grown up in ~~xxx~~ other countries, in very <sup>different</sup> conditions of class autonomy and/or armed struggle. Our relationship with Lotta Continua is a case in point. We feel that the closeness of the relationship has been really valuable. It has also been quite pernicious where we have attempted to model our interventions and understandings, and particularly our models of organisation too closely on LC. For example, we feel that the first shopstewards pamphlet drew too closely on Italy - plus one British experience - Fords. We have to recognise how LC has developed out of an entirely different history; The explosion of students and workers autonomy in '68-'69. We ~~xxx~~ think it is an open question even now whether LC can be said to represent all ~~sectors~~ sectors in struggle in Italy. ~~Whether~~ Whether it is or not, it is certain that the conditions for the emergence of a mass revolutionary women's movement are much better developed here than Italy.

In some ways, the long-term potential for a ~~total~~ total unification of the class - even if the development seems slower - is greater in Britain. This is an important point. If we measure the class struggle here against Italy '69 or even France '69, one could be easily led into calling it 'sectionalist'. What we have tried to do here is give examples of sectoral struggles that are autonomous, and that are no more 'sectionalist' than the Scottish working-class is 'nationalist'. @ (This is not to say that sectionalism and nationalism hold no influence in W/C consciousness.) We see the growth of these sectoral struggles as a precondition for class unification. And rather than the measure of Italy '69, we should use the measure of Britain '68.

"The development of socialist sectarianism and that of the real working class movement always stand in inverse ratio to each other. Sects are justified (historically) so long as the working class is not yet ripe for an independent historical movement. As soon as it has attained this maturity all sects are essentially reactionary. Nevertheless, what history exhibits everywhere has repeated in the history of the International. What is antiquated tries to re-establish itself and maintain its position within the newly acquired form."  
(Marx to F. Balte in New York Nov 23 1871)

### 1. How do we expect to grow?

We think we should be looking for our growth to women, from the womens movement and outside it, to the white-collar, service and educational sectors, to W/C militants in industry, to claimants and students. We think we shall initially be working with militants in these sectors on the basis of their own struggles. But we want BF to be accessible to militants from all sectors who come to see the need for a revolution. The different needs of militants in those different areas pose different needs for organisation.

We think that particularly at present groups of militants in various sectors are crystalising and are likely to become more public. We'll have to learn to work with these groups without necessarily thinking we can recruit them on a first-time basis. This requires from us a greater mobility locally and nationally than we have had in the past.

We think it's a political error to look to splits in the Trotskyist left for our growth. But we do want to relate to those militants, particularly in the base-groups of the Trots and the CP, who are tired of dogmatism and who recognise the weaknesses of those organisations in providing a strategy that can relate to their own situation. (We have to recognise in this the use people make of "the party" to meet other comrades in struggle. This doesn't make them Trotskyist or Stalinist ideologues.) We disagree completely with relating to those Trotskyist groups which are just looking for a purer form of Trotskyism.

We think that there are a lot of militant around who are consciously looking for a clear political practice, who feel stymied by both the Traditional and Libertarian Lefts, but see no clear alternative. We don't have the desire or the capacity to present those people with a line for working in every situation. Nor do we think that sort of line is what people are looking for. What we have are the elements of a political perspective, a way of understanding the key question 'What is class power', a solid approach to mass work, and some valuable knowledge for intervention and analysis in different situations. Once we have come to some agreement on what these are, we can really get down to spreading this knowledge, and helping other groups get started. (We know of four potential new groups in London.)

#### ON RECRUITMENT

The question of recruitment can't be reduced to one of expecting militants to adopt our ideas and lifestyle wholesale.

(1) Our experience organising with students, for example at Goldsmiths college, is the following: they have decisively rejected the sectarianism of the left sects, they aren't looking for 'another group', but of politics that explains their own situation. They want to be involved in other peoples struggles but they don't want to be used in any way. This is an expression of their autonomy, and not their sectionalism. They reject a politics of merely meetings and leaflets and demand a social context that can overcome the isolation they feel which is part of their situation as students.

(2) Working class militants in industry, in our experience will work within the base situation, will take our ideas seriously, but don't particularly feel a need at this time to join BF. This makes base organisations the most important to develop

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Industrial militants are interested in how we can add to their power and organisation in their immediate ~~xxx~~ situation primarily, and not in an organisation that acts national when the basis for it to be so doesn't yet exist.

(3) We feel that there are large numbers of women now in the women's movement looking for a mass practice on the basis of a Marxist-Feminist politics, such as we are developing in East London. ELBF Women are taking a major responsibility for organising the International Womens Day march, getting local women to come. Its through this sort of thing that women can become involved in BF and relate to our wide involvement in local struggles as the only political womens group in the area. Some women will want to continue to develop their practise from within the women's movement; other will want to relate to BF as well. At the moment a lot of these are put off BF by sexism and its ambiguity about womens struggles.

For many women the struggle itself cant be seperated from the need for a social context in which they can recognise themselves - like womens centres; and a way of organising their lives to ~~xx~~ buy themselves time to be active and to enjoy themselves. Womens situation requires autonomous organisation and a different style of organising from other sectors. We demand that BF changes to meet this, rather than women being pressured to change to fit BF as it is now. Locally this means being flexible - e.g. in choosing how to use the name BF in organising - and working in a way that doesn't concentrate power with full-timers. Women always have less time and it's the organisation's responsibility to make sure they get more. Meetings and conferences aren't the struggle; we want them to be pleasurable experiences, with proper arrangements for kids, and structured in a way in which we can all contribute.

## 2. Political basis of a Big Flame Group

We feel that the question of organisation has been falsely posed - i.e. tendency vs. organisation, where organisation is made to mean centralisation. We are for organisation, but against centralisation. We think that BF in this period should be an organisation of semi-autonomous groups based on a clear and shared understanding on what we mean by the politics of autonomy, and a common conception of the process of class unification and taking power.

We can summarise this minimum conception, which we have tried to outline in this document, as follows:

(i) we are fighting for communism as part of our own needs. Communism means the abolition of wage labour. Class struggle is the struggle against wage labour and thus against capital.

(ii) the class is divided into sectors by the hierarchy of labour-power. These divisions weaken the class. Reformism is the ability of the ruling class to maintain these divisions - but they have to pay for the privilege. The struggle against these divisions is the class struggle. That's the importance of feminism. It's not a moral question. Therefore the importance of the question of women, immigrants, schoolkids, and gays. Breaking the hierarchy of labour demands the autonomy of the different sectors.

(iii) BF serves the needs of the class struggle, to help strengthen it, unify it, and generalise it, but as part of it, from inside it, and with a sense of the limits of what we can do. We must work ~~xxxx~~ at a mass level, not with an elite.

(iv) this includes the needs of the class struggle internationally, again with a sense of what we can do. We can do a lot on Ireland.

(v) a commitment to the struggle in Ireland against the British state and against imperialism in general. Solidarity with all forces against the British state, including both sections of the IRA.

Solidarity does not mean support for their politics.

- (22)
- (vi) organisation is a tactical question. The struggle for communism against labour, against the hierarchy of skills, against sexism, against racism, against authoritarianism, is the strategy of the working class; it is our need as a part of that struggle.
- (vii) a commitment to mass work and making interventions in their local area; a willingness to help build a general revolutionary organisation nationally and internationally, from within the process of class unification.

### FORMING NEW GROUPS

For the moment the procedure for new groups who want to join should be that one person ~~from~~ or more from each group go to visit the group and find out what they are about, and discuss in a co-ordinated way the different politics and practise we are engaged in. Those people then report back to their own groups, which then decide whether they want the group to join. A decision is then made by majority vote between all BF groups. This assumes of course that present BF groups share similar conceptions of our basic politics. If they do not then the whole conception of new groups is thrown up into the air.

### 3. An organisational structure for Big Flame

#### A. THE LOCAL GROUPS

we feel that for the moment and for the foreseeable future the local groups will be the prime organisational unit of BF. This is true for a number of reasons:

- differences in the development of autonomy in different areas - e.g. London housing crisis
- the primacy of base group work in developing our understanding of the movement of the class as a whole.
- \* Our prime emphasis as an organisation should be in base-group organising. Everyone should be involved in this.
- the main job of unifying different sectors in struggle (eg. tenants and squatters, or from factory to community) rests with the area groups.

Local groups should ultimately determine their own priorities, but this should be within a framework of a shared basic politics in BF, and a nationally generated discussion about the different interventions.

The groups will have to remain experimental and flexible in their interventions. They should see themselves as providing a social focus and taking some responsibility for the individual lives of militants within them. They should also take responsibility for their own education and self-education structures - although there are ways that this can be co-ordinated nationally. Finally, the groups will have to find their own structures that best relate to the struggles of their areas, and give those with less time more access to decision-making. Obviously, this is not easy.

Political discussion should be based in local groups and base-groups, so the democratisation of theory-production is rooted at the base of BF, because that is where our practise is, where theory is most directly clarified. It should also occur at inter-base group meetings, commission meetings, at conferences, and at weekend schools.

#### B. NATIONAL INTERBASE GROUP MEETINGS

We feel that these are best set up on an ad-hoc basis to meet the needs of comrades involved in different sectional struggles. e.g. cars, claimants, housing, education. They should see themselves as trying to build an analysis, from the ground up, of the struggle in their particular sectors. Interbase group meetings already occur for car and education groups; it will be up to local groups to initiate further interbase group meetings.

#### C. COMMISSIONS: IRELAND, WOMEN.

We see these two commissions as having a special status, distinct



G. PUBLICATIONS COMMITTEE (24)

Local groups, co-ordinating groups, commissions, and base groups, should be free to publish whatever pamphlets etc. they wish under their own name and in relation to their own local needs.

Pamphlets that are national in scope should be open to discussion and amendment, and these discussions should be reflected in discussions on the publications committee. The PC should continue with 2 delegates per group as now, with one rotating. If differences can't be resolved in these discussions, rather than a line being chosen by vote, the differences should be brought out and maintained in public. We feel this makes more sense than the two opposite views being concealed within the publication. This only makes more confusion. (e.g. Chile pamphlet).

The PC should have the power to initiate and commission national pamphlets, as well as local groups.

The journal

We feel that the journal should be less of a 'polished' theoretical journal, and should be more popular, open to more different kinds of material, more of a magazine, more readable by working-class militants, to whom it should be accessible.

It should express the debates within BF and the debates within our political tendency. We see little reason why it should ever refuse to print anything emerging within BF, especially if it has had time for discussion and criticism. The publications committee should determine the overall balance of the journal by majority vote. A local group or base group which sponsors an article commissioned by the PC - provided that it is produced in time for discussion and criticism by other groups - shall retain the right to publish in the journal. We don't think we have reached the stage in BF where the majority can deny the minority a public voice.

A national newspaper

We don't feel we have the time, resources, depth of local intervention or coherence of politics to put out a national newspaper at this time; or a local paper with national pages. For us a newspaper is not necessarily a good basis for local organising. We feel that the priority at this time is in the building of other BF intervention groups around the country. Out of this development we may begin to have the basis for a national paper; but this would require much more discussion. We feel that it must be open to groups to put out local papers if they wish. And we must expect them to draw from the general political discussion in BF in writing general political articles.

N.B. We think there's an urgent need for short, readable pamphlets laying out aspects of our politics very clearly.

Bulletin

We don't want a bulletin at this time. But what we do want is the commitment of regular monthly send-offs of reports from base-groups, discussion and education documents, and leaflets from all groups, with enough extra copies to pass around.