

A REASSESSMENT OF 'REVOLUTIONARY UNITY' AND THE 'NEW REVOLUTIONARY ORGANISATION' IN LIGHT OF BEYOND THE FRAGMENTS.

BF DRAFT MANIFESTO: 'we'll always work for unity, for joint initiatives, front activities, joint debates among revolutionaries, wherever and whenever it is valuable for the advancement of the advancement of the class struggle. What we propose is the possibility of forming a new organisation forged inside the struggle and the experiences of vanguard elements of the working class. . .

'We see the potential for this movement to emerge, for a new phase of class struggle to start. But we've got to work for it. Inside it, we see the possibility for a lot of leading working class militants, non-aligned ~~militants~~ revolutionaries, disillusioned socialist militants, activists in the feminist and youth movements to join forces in a more formal way in a new organisation.'

1979 CONFERENCE RESOLUTION: 'That Big Flame positively reaffirms its commitment to revolutionary unity and towards the development of a new revolutionary organisation in the foreseeable future.'

BF has long had a commitment to revolutionary unity, always insisting that our 'mass politics tendency' should be strong within it, and always opposing a simple 'regroupment' of left organisations, without a qualitative change in these organisations in the process and without other forces coming in.

Among other things, 'Beyond the Fragments' can be seen as a powerful affirmation of this position, as well as a source of many clues as to how the position can be usefully developed. To take the contributions individually, Lynne's piece shows the need for going beyond the fragments (and the need at the same time to maintain the positive contributions made by the fragments); Hilary's piece at the end shows how the new movement/organisation can become a reality; and Sheila's article shows persuasively (despite its weaknesses) what sort of changes would have to take place in the left organisations taking part in the 'project' (Big Flame included), and what sort of structures would have to evolve in the new movement/organisation, for it to be not only revolutionary socialist but also feminist.

The following problems, some of which have come up in BF discussions in the past (some quite frequently), seem to be the main ones raised as to ^{what kind of} ~~the new~~ revolutionary unity we are talking about; and how to get there:

- 1: pre-figurative versus combative forms of organisation.
- 2: linking the local with the regional, national and international without the 'local' being sunk without trace (as is common in Trotskyist politics)
- 3: how to link up ~~with~~ single-issue campaigns with others, how to broaden consciousness by doing this, how to cover several campaigns with mainly part-time activists (assuming the trend away from 'professional revolutionaries' continues) - all these related.
- 4: how to relate to the Labour Party and activists within it.
- 5: how to combat the idea, held by most of the Left, of 'Party first, Movement second and only for the Party's benefit' - especially now with the potential upsurge of struggle against the Tories.
- 6: what is the basis for joint discussion/joint work. How to balance between so wishy-washy a basis that the broad front collapses as soon as it is confronted by an issue of principle and, on the other hand, so principled and/or sophisticated a basis that the front is not 'broad' in the first place?
- 7: how to fight for a style of politics at the same time as fighting for a political position at the same time as struggling to keep the campaign/joint activity as united, effective and democratic as possible at the same time as not talking too much, not imposing a BF style and a BF position at the same time as doing all this in other campaigns at the same time as living in a collective and trying to be consistent at the same time (are you still with me) as trying to maintain non-sexist love relationships. And you've got a full-time job. Ho.Ho.
- 8: (this only comes indirectly from 'Be. the Frag.') how to prevent the 'new revolutionary organisation' being just as male-dominated, just as dominated by university graduates, just as dominated by bankrupt ideas lifted wholesale out of the ^(which needn't be bibles, at all) Marxist-Leninist bibles, and just as un-new as ^{most of} the ones we know today.
- 9: how to select the areas where progress towards a new revolutionary movement/organisation is likely to be most fruitful, and most appropriate for us to concentrate our efforts. And, more important, whether we prioritise the new movement or the new organisation and/or how we see the two relating.
- 10: how to argue for all the positive aspects of 'Be the Frag.' without being identified with statements like: 'our views are valid because they come from within us and not because we hold a received correctness', which is an unfortunate, unnecessary and potentially dangerous juxtaposition and one which is out of character with the general thrust of Sheila's article. (obviously a racist's views are not valid because they come from within, any more than if they come from without.)

I don't really intend to deal with all these points. I'd be a fool if I did! I list them partly with the intention of developing them further in collective discussion with others, partly for my own clarification. Meanwhile, to meet the deadline for the dayschool bulletin, here's some elaboration of selected points in light of my own experience of joint campaigns and the rest.

1. Pre-figurative v. combative: A crucial and all-too-difficult question, this one.

There 's a nice way of talking about it as a dialectical process whereby the two concepts interact with each other, adapt to each other, and out of this process produce something new and something close to being the embryo for a new socialist organization. Unfortunately it's not so easy when you get down to the nitty-gritty of it.

Pre-figurative means, essentially, living your socialist principles today, as far as possible. Combative means fighting capitalism effectively enough to make the revolution possible.

The experience of the Russian revolution, its aftermath and its siblings, means we can't possibly ignore the pre-figurative if we want a socialist revolution.

The experience of libertarianism, life-style politics, etc. means we can't ignore the combative if we want a revolution at all.

The two then interweave (if you let them). We begin to question classical tenets of Leninism - especially the classical form of democratic centralism and its ossified derivatives in Stalinism and Trotskyism, and the notion of bourgeois intellectuals bringing pre-conceived 'correct ideas' to the masses. We agree ^{with} Kellontai when she says: 'If only comrades would cease to consider it necessary to jump heavily on anyone who says anything that isn't at all new, would cool their 'polemical' ardour somewhat . . .', though sometimes we question the wisdom of our reticence, when 'newness' resemble nothing less than wishy-washiness.

We begin to introduce creches at meetings as a matter of principle (only it gets forgotten sometimes . . .) and the creches, when they work, are not just park-places for children. We have rotating chairpersons, rotating leaders and all too many circular arguments. And we live in a way that is collective without the 'individual' in us being denied -

a lesson we've learnt from the Stalinist 'collectivism' of the Soviet bloc - and we try to operate politically in a way that is collective, democratic, participatory, non-alienating, stimulating, consciousness-raising as well as efficient. And we wish it worked better.

WHEN THE
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In our slow, painstaking attempts to develop this perspective, however, something is not quite right. Central to the perspective is the commitment to building an organisation that is both working-class and feminist. By the former we mean: a majority of working class members (whether blue collar, non-managerial white collar or service workers) and a socialist political perspective throughout the organisation; by 'feminist' we mean an anti-sexist, feminist perspective throughout the organisation with appropriate structures and with high-level participation in these by women.

What do we have? An organisation dominated by white, male, graduate and not particularly working-class members (myself included), with our working-class rhetoric not ringing exactly 'true', and with our socialist feminist perspective less than fully developed (to put it mildly).

I think it's time to make a realistic assessment of our experience in the motor industry, mines and elsewhere. I'd like to make the suggestion - though I'm willing to be corrected by those with more knowledge and experience - that the nature of our organisation requires ~~for~~ a level of patience, commitment, tolerance and feminist consciousness that we can expect of very, very few working class people. In terms of ~~the~~ their day-to-day work against management or the union bureaucracy, the SWP or, conceivably, the CP, have more to offer. If we offer a vision of a genuine socialist revolution, a vision (together with a way of operating politically) that attracts them more to us, well, they can easily see the rank-and-file grouping as a sufficient area of activity -

or at least one that takes up most of their energy outside of working hours. So, in the short or even the medium term, can we realistically expect a majority of working class members?

I think not. I think that the movement - that is, a socialist movement along the lines proposed by Hilary W. - can attract many w/c militants, but we are unlikely to, as BF. Don't get me wrong, though. I quite definitely do want BF to maintain ~~its~~ (and more) its present orientation to the w/c, but I think we should be more realistic about what that means in terms of w/c membership. At the same time, I favour Hilary W's new socialist movement (which certainly can attract w/c militants) and - if it strengthens its feminist perspective - I think BF has an important role to play in preventing this movement being yet another 'arrow' towards a non-feminist, non-socialist revolution.

The new socialist movement is potentially in a much better position than BF to develop the difficult working-class/feminist conflict. Yet this conflict can't be avoided if we want a revolutionary socialist feminist movement/organisation. What's more, it's a conflict that BF has some knowledge and experience of, and some commitment to developing. So . . . it seems to me that BF has a clear role to play in the movement, whether in strengthening its (socialist) feminist or its working-class content, or both, and seeking to develop the most appropriate way forward to a revolutionary socialist feminist organisation.



THE LABOUR PARTY!

Point 4. Relating to Labour Party activists.

Hilary's conception of the new socialist movement differs from BF's (as expressed in the draft manifesto) in that it includes Labour Party

activists, whereas we argue for a 'clear anti-capitalist and anti-reformist content' (which would prevent us making a clear decision either way).

Hilary is right to include the LP activists. They are both revolutionaries and reformists; they are active in many of the areas where we are active; ~~far better that~~ we can't allow nutters like the Militant a monopoly; and better that we draw LP activists into the 'movement' than that we get drawn into the LP (with all the weird and unwonderful and restrictive structures that we'd find there).

But if we welcome these comrades, we must do so with some trepidation. It forces us to be clear about our critique of reformism - which we are not, as yet - and it forces us to quickly learn how to put this critique across in a non-sectarian ^{and in a way} way, that will not alienate people who see everybody on the ^{for} Left as a Dave Spart (dogmatic, anachronistic and full of 'build-the-Party-smash-the-state-fight-imperialist-oppression' jargon).

We also have to bear in mind that if the New Socialist Movement (NSM) is going to achieve anything it will to begin to find a way out of the Tory-Labour - Tory cycle. So the NSM must begin to develop a socialist alternative to Labour, and LP activists within it must accept that. They are there as LP 'entryists' if you like.

5. Movement first, Party second.

Most organisations in the NSM will push the 'Party first, Movement second' line. We will have to combat this as resolutely as ever, but will have to find new arguments in light of the decline of some movements (e.g. the Black ^(West Indian) and anti-racist movements) and in light of the SWP's (for example) renewed turn to sectarian Party-building and rejection of ANL-type initiatives - a rejection they decided on because of its failure to recruit to the SWP the 'right sort' of members, and which they've replaced by the Women's Voice strategy (politically but not organisationally independent).

The NSM can go a long way without the likes of the SWP. But in the long term it needs it, which means it being effective enough and 'working class' enough to impress SW, and which means the NSM continually debating with and working with SW in the hope of gradually winning it over to NSM - type politics.

49.

6. Basis for joint work/ potential for NSM in existing 'movement'

If the NSM has any real basis it lies, as Hilary W. forcefully argues, in

the movement, or rather the mass of fragments, that have developed over the last dozen years or so. But what is this 'movement'?

Apart from the traditional organisations of the w/mc, there are: anti-racist/anti-fascist groups, ANL groups, troops ~~mk~~ out groups, Women and Ireland, Women against Imperialism, Campaign against Corrie, NAC, women's self-help, anti-nuke groups, ecology groups, Ethnic solidarity, anti-apartheid, under 5's campaigns, neighbourhood associations, tenants' associations, rank-and-file groups, women in the NUT, Gays in Nalgo, alternative photography groups, CSE groups, reading Capital groups, Campaign against the Immigration Laws, AGIN, BASH, Sus Campaign, fightback campaigns, health fightback, politics of health, Gay socialists alliance, alternative cinema, fringe theatre, street theatre, politics of music, Red Therapy, Ginseng Rools ok ~~█~~ . . . to name but a few of them.

So what is the potential for a NSM here? In what ways can all these fragments become more than the sum of their parts? In what ways ~~█~~ can these fragments come closer together politically and ideologically? Which of the fragments are more likely to bring the movement forward? To what extent are any of them bringing a socialist revolution nearer, rather than just reforming capitalism and/or making it more bearable for us on the Left to live under? And which fragments should we concentrate on, if we see all or most as part of the general 'socialist project'?

These are tricky ~~█~~ questions, but ones that are inadequately dealt with in 'be the frag.' or BF discussions, and ones that are crucial for us to resolve if the NSM is to achieve a breakthrough. Too often we see the women's movement and the Black movement lumped together, ignoring differences both between them and within them (viz. esp. the collapse of the West Indian movement and the dramatic growth in radical Asian organisations). And too often we see these mass ~~█~~ movements equated with a host of other fragments or movements which ^{are} of a quite different quality, let alone size.

And if we select ~~out~~ the movements/campaigns where we see joint work with others as most useful in furthering the NSM, how do we work with others, what sort of broad front do we fight for, and how do we best develop BF politics inside the Campaign? These questions are particularly relevant when you consider the considerable differences ~~█~~ between, for example, a fightback campaign and an anti-nuke campaign (in Lambeth, the former is largely the committed Left, full of experience and close to the Labour Movement, the latter is largely non-committed Left and eco-types, with little contact with the Labour Movement. They have a very different concept of organising). And probably any answer will have to allow for differences between campaigns.

It's not the purpose of this article to provide answers. What I'd like to see is a number of contributions from people who've experienced campaigns and/or the 'movement'. As far as I can see, BF has had the best sort of politics for joint work, for developing the movement, for finding the balance between not being sectarian and not being wishy-washy, for long enough that we should be in the position to ~~maximise~~ develop our campaign/movement work a mite further. Hopefully.

So let's hear about the rise and fall of campaigns because of this, the rise and rise because of that, the exclusion of BF because of too much of this, and the great respect for BF because of . . . well, let's not be modest.

and I'll do so in time
For my part, I have something to contribute. For now, I feel very inspired by 'be the frag.', especially by Hilary's piece, and I'd like to see BF doing all it can to encourage the development ~~the~~ of the sort of new socialist movement that she talks about. I've tried to point to some of the problems, but above all I've tried to ask some of the questions which I really think need to be resolved if the movement is to come to fruition. I very much hope for some of the answers to come from within BF.

And in the meantime I'd encourage more support for 'Socialist Centre'-type projects. In Lambeth, it's been a great loss for the Left that the socialist club was shut down about 18 months ago; in Newcastle the centre seems to have been a great boon, especially in so far as it has not restricted itself to being a cultural centre, but has acted as a coordinating centre for campaigns; and in Islington, West London and elsewhere it seems to have only been less successful because of the failure of much of the organised Left to support the project - which is grounds for more effort and not less.

Here's to more than just a jolt in the next Tory-Labour-Tory cycle!

Ben Johnson
S. London BF.