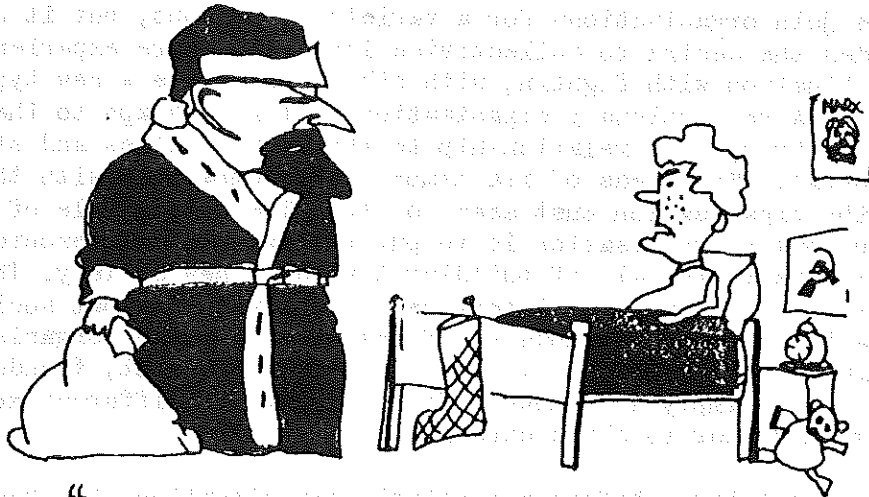


# RE-THINKING PARTY & CLASS



"Bloody Lenin again! Why can't you dress as Father Christmas like everyone else's Dad?"

This article was written jointly by Ian McKenzie (Liverpool) and Fred Read (Leeds). It was conceived - nine months ago - as a document for the Education Programme. Parts of it were written a few months ago. It has now been hurriedly finished, with the slightly different object of contributing to the "Fragments, Party and Class" Day School. While we agreed on the broad outline of the document, we haven't had time to check what each other has written, so there may be bits which we don't agree on.

## BEYOND LENINISM

FEBRUARY 1980

## A. RE-THINKING PARTY AND CLASS: LENINISM AND BEYOND

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The question of the relations between party and class - taking in both the internal organisation and the interaction with movements and struggles - has always been central to the socialist movement. Big Flame has always faced up to the problem of how to re-assess traditional theory and practice, particularly connected to the Leninist tradition, without abandoning the concept of a general organisation intervening inside struggle.

People join organisations for a variety of reasons, but it normally includes the desire to collectivise ideas and share experiences, in combination with fighting with others to create a new type of society. A revolutionary organisation must give shape to these reasons through its relationship to the working class and struggles in general. The needs of its members are compatible with the role the organisation must seek to play. The unique role of the revolutionary organisation is to put the talents and resources of its members to the aid of building towards a new society. This is a task that requires it to intervene collectively in that society, generalising ideas, demands and forms of action. Any organisation that fails to do this, will become a propaganda sect, friendship network, or simply a framework for activists in different movements to come together to share experiences.

In the short term, before a revolutionary situation, the basic function of the organisation is to build working class self-activity - independent action, demands and organisation in all areas of life and activity. This self-activity is not merely for its own sake, but flows from the idea, central to revolutionary marxism, that only a self-conscious and organised working class can create the kind of socialist society based on direct democracy and proletarian power. This constitutes the main historical difference with reformist socialism, which relies on the primacy of parliament plus trade unionism.

The revolutionary organisation must intervene independently (some refer to this as a vanguard role) because such development of working class activity does not advance spontaneously. Struggles happen spontaneously, though this is often misleading, as they are in fact prepared by the militants within them. But the consciousness and organisation necessary to advance them arise from an interaction with revolutionary ideas and intervention. It is not a question of an organisation setting itself up as a leadership and expecting others to follow. But to be prepared to take a lead, to be inside the struggles, bringing together the most combative and conscious militants to generalise demands and action. This role effects the recruitment policy of the organisation. It must bring together those militants who are, or want to be the most conscious and active. A revolutionary organisation cannot carry out its tasks inside the working class movement, without a politically educated, active membership. Reformist organisations carry passive and non-educated memberships precisely because their "socialism" is handed down from above, without independent self-activity.

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In the longer term, if and when struggles have advanced and helped accelerate a capitalist crisis, the role of the revolutionary organisation becomes more directed to preparing the working class to take power. This involves the central task of developing organs of popular power, institutions of direct democracy which are an alternative to existing ways of re-producing capitalist rule (eg parliament etc).

Inside them (workers councils tenants assemblies etc), we must act to prepare the working class politically and militarily not simply against the ruling class, but for the need to go beyond the reformists who will want to limit change. Before and during the period of what some call dual power the revolutionary organisations are likely to mature into a party or parties. This is not a technical distinction. It refers to their growth in mass character, through winning over significant sections of working class activists, so that it becomes seen as more than groups or organisations, but as the leading political reference point for an alternative to the reformists. This concept is necessary to distinguish it from the various "announcements" from organisations that they are the party, that are made in a totally administrative way unrelated to their relationship to mass struggle.

This period of intense struggle for power can be long and dangerous. History shows us that it is in this period that the most vital struggles are waged in winning and consolidating (during the period marxists have referred to as the "dictatorship of the proletariat") working class power, expressed through new organs of government at local and national level. Neither changes in the nature of society and state power, nor the existence of soviets or workers councils lessens the need for the role played by a party. The crisis is uneven and the situation reaches crucial moments, turning points where decisive action is needed. Such action is conditioned by highly complex political and military considerations. Organs of popular power, in which revolutionaries will co-exist with other political currents, do not homogenise and unify the class, nor dissolve differences of ideology and interest overnight. The tactical and strategical problems can only be dealt with through politically centralised party/s and their activity in the class.

## B. THE LENINIST ROOTS

This conception of organisation and party is not derived solely from Russia 1917. An examination of the events in Portugal and Chile in more recent times will show a consistent thread of political problems, despite the significantly changed context and conditions. Nevertheless, many of the ideas do have their roots in Lenin's theory of organisation and the Bolshevik experience. So, before mounting a critique of Leninism, it is important to show how Leninism was a vital breakthrough in revolutionary politics and organisation, whose roots extend to the tasks facing us today.

When many socialists today talk about the specific historical basis of Leninism (whether to show its "outdatedness" or otherwise), they refer to the police-state conditions of Tsarist Russia. Yet the essence of Leninism was a challenge to the dominant schools of marxism in Europe as a whole around the turn of century. At the time marxist parties (like the SPD in Germany) had become semi-reformist, accepting a parliamentary road, leaving day-to-day struggle to unions that did not challenge the system. As Rosa Luxemburg showed, they feared independent working class action like the mass strike.

Russian conditions gave Lenin an impetus to reject an ossified marxism that condemned them to wait for capitalism to fully develop before adopting the methods of socialist revolution. In challenging the idea that in a so-called underdeveloped country, revolution had to go through a bourgeois stage, led by the bourgeoisie, Lenin was raising questions of political strategy and organisation. For Russia was not simply a backward peasant economy, it had highly developed industrial centres. Therefore in asserting the actual possibility of revolution,

the impact was felt within European Marxism as a whole. By not accepting that socialism grew out of capitalist development, Leninism asserted that socialism was made by a self-active working class, politically independent of the bourgeoisie. But it required a strategy that did not accept domination by the spontaneous development of normal working class struggle. This would have meant, particularly in the specific historical conditions, accepting an economistic trade unionism. Although Lenin referred to politics as "concentrated economics," the existing relations between state, capital and working class (particularly the absence of an interventionist state and the domination of the workers' movement by skilled workers who saw power in factory terms) were weighted against day-to-day struggles taking an explicitly political form. Only by emphasising a level of difference between political and economic struggle could the question of state power and its seizure be consistently posed.

Such an "interventionist" strategy required a different organisational form which would challenge existing models. As structures reflect political tasks, the semi-reformist strategy of European Marxism produced parties that were large, loose and open, passive memberships manipulated by bureaucratic leadership. By restoring a revolutionary political strategy, Leninism gave back to marxist organisation a revolutionary role and form. Political intervention inside working class struggle, breaking with the parliamentary/union model, required a "vanguard organisation" prepared to organise the most conscious workers to combat the ruling class and its state. A loose organisation of uneducated, unprepared members was useless for this task.

It needed a tightly organised party of dedicated militants, that politically educated its members to act as all-round organisers (cadres). This was seen, particularly in the Russian conditions of police state and enforced clandestinity, a full-time commitment. Both workers and intellectuals were encouraged to give up wage labour and put the services to party needs. Hence the idea of "professional revolutionaries," obviously also influenced by the belief that revolution was an imminent possibility. The need to act quickly and in a disciplined manner against a powerful enemy, also helped to shape the idea of democratic centralism, where a politically educated membership democratic made decisions and then carried them out in a completely centralised manner.

Despite well-documented weaknesses and mistakes, the general historical validity of Leninism was shown in the complete collapse of the marxist movement when faced with the 1st World War and the later confirmation of their reformist politics. The revolutionary wing of marxism (Trotsky, Luxembourg, Gramsci etc) all sided with the Bolsheviks and accepted (with criticisms) a Leninist strategy. The problem remains, that Leninist political/organisational model handed down an ambiguous legacy to revolutionaries, which was not recognised by Lenin himself. His theoretical justification for the model, combined reference to historical conditions and a universal (and wrong) theory of consciousness which carried great dangers for party-class-movement relations (see later). Our task is to disentangle the historical specificity of Europe in this period and of Russia, from the continuing validity of key aspects of Leninism.

## ORGANISATION THE LIMITS OF THE LENINIST THEORY AND PRACTICE OF

In this section we are looking at six aspects of Leninist theory and practice. Two things need stressing at the outset. Firstly it should be noted that we do not make our criticisms from the point of view of the structure of Leninist organisations, nor even of the many practical things that such organisations do and have done, and which we are critical of. We are not rehearsing the arguments about Kronstadt, nor of the Leninist efforts at manipulating the autonomous movements. Our criticism is levelled at the political theory which underlies these practices, because it is these ideas which result in the structures and practices of which we disapprove. Second, despite the seriousness of our criticism of Leninism, it should not be supposed that we are reverting to anarchist or libertarian ideas about organisation. As other sections of this document show, we are committed to building Big Flame into a strong, united organisation of committed revolutionaries who believe that BF has an important leadership role within the mass working class struggle. Our object here is to argue that Lenin's theories about the nature of organisation need considerable amendment to meet the situation we are in today.

### 1: The historical conditions

It is a marxist commonplace to note that theories do not drop out of the sky - they are developed under particular historical conditions, and are deeply affected by those conditions. Only a few particularly rabid marxists believe that Marx and Lenin (and sometimes Trotsky and Stalin) were developing theories akin to those of pure science, which is alleged to be unaffected by historical conditions.

We have to note, therefore, <sup>that</sup> the conditions in Russia and Europe under which Lenin was developing his ideas are quite significantly different from those we find today. The working class was relatively newly formed, and the peasantry was a significant force. Working class people had a history of massive struggle, which had become, primarily, a struggle for trade union rights. Marxism was a relatively new idea, which could not be tarnished by reference to a series of "marxist revolutions" of dubious benefit. The capitalist class was also relatively new to power, and still had numerous battles to fight with the landowning aristocracy, which resulted in some countries in a relatively sophisticated effort to incorporate and divide the working class, and in other countries in severe repression of all dissent. Finally, it was a period of war, which can have a de-stabilising effect for the capitalist class, especially in those countries where the war is being lost.

This is not to suggest that the working class is stronger and the state is weaker today. All we are saying is that different forces are operating, and this has implications for our theories of organisation.

### 2: Theory of consciousness

"Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers only from without, that is, only from outside of the economic struggle, from outside of the sphere of relations between workers and employers ... To bring political knowledge to the workers the Social-Democrats (ie revolutionaries) must ... dispatch units of their army in all directions."

(Lenin "What is to be done" (1902) Peking edition p.98.  
Emphasis as in original.)

We disagree with this theory of consciousness, and its implications for the role of revolutionaries, but one or two points may be made

in defence of Lenin. The working class was less experienced, and less well educated than it is now. Socialist ideas were less available, and repression made it difficult for revolutionaries to spread their ideas. Lenin also had to fight against those on the left who argued that revolutionary consciousness would arise automatically out of the economic struggle over wages and conditions (the economists); against those who said that workers would simply rise up anyway because capitalism was so intolerable (anarchists and spontaneists); and against those who said that all that was needed to spark off the revolution was action which showed that the ruling class was not as strong as it seemed (terrorists). All these currents exist today, and to criticise Lenin's theory of consciousness is not to identify ourselves with any of them.

First of all we have to look at the implications this theory holds for political practice. The "programme fetishism" of Trotskyists may be a deformation of Leninism, but it is logically connected to this theory. "Taking politics to the workers" does imply the search for the perfect programme of demands - and Trotsky's perfect package (Transitional Demands) are believed to be sufficiently attractive and realisable to be adopted by non-revolutionary workers, but which, when implemented, automatically hasten the death of capitalism. The very idea is manipulative, and it justifies any kind of tactics to get the demands taken up by union branches, tenants committees or movement meetings. Further, there is little evidence to prove that these demands cannot be incorporated by capital - "opening the books" can show that a company is bankrupt, and inflation proofing of wages has virtually been accepted by many firms.

Second, we criticise the theory itself. Every working class struggle shows that political ideas are generated by workers irrespective of the presence of revolutionaries among them, and that these ideas are class conscious. These ideas are not always revolutionary ideas, but not even the most ardent Leninist would claim that, if there were a few more communists injecting the right ideas from outside, they would suddenly swing the workers into revolutionaries. And working class people do hold revolutionary ideas without being taught them by members of revolutionary parties. The problem is not simply one of the adoption of "class political consciousness", it has more to do with the persuasiveness of other ideas, such as "the Labour Party is the best we can hope for", or "you can't trust any politicians, even the so-called socialists", or "capitalism is too strong to overthrow", or "socialism's alright in theory, but look what happens in practice". All these ideas can go alongside "class political consciousness" and cannot be simply dispelled by Leninist lectures.

Clear, political argument by revolutionaries is an essential task, and a revolutionary organisation is an important vehicle for developing these ideas and co-ordinating efforts to persuade people of their validity. But the organisation is by no means the only source of these ideas. We argue that two other factors are important. One is that the struggle over the wage, and over the conditions of production, is a far more political struggle than Lenin, in his struggle against the Economists, would have us believe, particularly in modern capitalism's declining phase. It very quickly brings workers into direct contact with state power, and it forces the realisation that capitalism has reduced the satisfaction of human needs to the struggle for money. Secondly, that this process of struggle to meet ones needs (for wages or social wages - housing, health care, nurseries etc) is itself an enormously important educator of "class political consciousness". People learn not only the realities of state power, but also the tactics for fighting state power. Most important of all, they learn that only an all-out struggle has any hope of success.

### : 3: The cadre organisation and the professional revolutionary

In "What Is To Be Done", Lenin frequently refers to the necessity for the revolutionary organisation to be composed of "professional revolutionaries". The footnote gives the major quote from Lenin on this point (for those who want His Master's Voice), and we have several comments to make about this idea - an idea never criticised by the Maoists or Trotskyists.

(a) Lenin's context : Russia 1902 : Throughout "What Is To Be Done" Lenin locates his argument in the social and political context of his time. In this piece on the professional revolutionary he stresses the context of the autocratic state, the political police and the effort to "wipe out" the revolutionary organisation. This is Lenin's method : to relate all questions of political programme, strategy and organisation to the particular relations of class forces facing the working class at that time. As class forces changed their relationship, so Lenin's arguments about programme, strategy and organisational methods changed. So the radically different arguments put forward in "State and Revolution" (1917) about the tasks of revolutionaries are not the product of confusion, or contradictions in his thought - they reflect his changed views derived from a new balance of forces. As we shall see below, in 1902 Lenin argues against all rotation of tasks, deriding this as "primitive democracy". In 1917 - when socialism is on the agenda - he says:

"Under socialism, much of 'primitive democracy' will inevitably be revived, since for the first time in the history of civilised society, the mass of the population will rise to taking an independent part, not only in voting and elections, but also in the everyday administration of the state".

Lenin, "State and Revolution" (1917), Moscow edition, 1969, p 106.  
Emphasis as in original.

In this period Lenin also argued against the exclusively cadre party and for the mass party. His view that the democratic centralist method of organising society would be based on voluntary co-operation (p.50) was, to say the least, optimistic.

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Lenin wrote:

"But since you raise the question of organisations being wiped out and stick to that question, then I assert that it is far more difficult to wipe out a dozen wise men than a hundred fools. And this position I shall defend no matter how much you incite the crowd against me for my "anti-democratic views" etc. As I have already said time and again that by "wise men" in connection with organisation, I mean professional revolutionaries, irrespective of whether they are trained from among students or working men. I assert :

- 1) that no revolutionary movement can endure without a stable organisation of leaders that maintains continuity;
- 2) that the wider the masses are drawn spontaneously into the struggle, forming the basis of the movement and participating in it, the more urgent the need for such an organisation, and the more solid this organisation must be (for it is much easier for demagogues to sidetrack the more backward sections of the masses).
- 3) that such an organisation must consist chiefly of people professionally engaged in revolutionary activity;
- 4) that in an autocratic state, the more we confine the membership of such an organisation to people who are professionally engaged in revolutionary activity and who have been professionally trained in the art of combating the political police, the more difficult will it be to wipe out such an organisation, and
- 5) the greater will be the number of people of the working class and of the other sections of society who will be able to join our organisation and perform active work in it."

Lenin, "What Is To Be Done" (1902), Peking edition, 1975, pp 152-3  
Emphasis as in the original.

But the point we are making here is that Lenin developed his concept of the professional revolutionary in a specific historical context, and later modified his ideas on the question of organisation. We argue that, in the context of class struggle today, we have to modify the concept of the professional revolutionary.

b) revolutionary activity today : The whole of this article is about "revolutionary activity today", so here we limit ourselves to one observation in relation to the concept of the professional revolutionary. Lenin argued for an organisation of professionals to combat a secret police force and bring about an insurrection. We do not believe that revolution will come to Britain in the 1980's (or 90's for that matter) in that way. For us, revolutionary politics are not the full-time, self-sacrificing, all-out effort at creating an insurrection. There may well be an insurrection at some late stage in the revolutionary process, but this is a long way off, and there is likely to be a period of "left government" before that. Our job, then, is long-term, and requires the patient building of revolutionary ideas among the masses, which includes creating structures and experiences of class struggle in which there are the germs of future socialist relationships.

c) the professional revolutionary and personal life : The concept of the professional revolutionary virtually excludes the idea that we can conduct our politics now in a way which hints at future socialist or communist relationships. Lenin, so far as I can tell, never says what being "professionally engaged in revolutionary activity" means in a day-to-day, personal way. Ernest Mandel, in "The Leninist Theory of Organisation" (IMG, 1971) is totally silent on this question. Lenin talks of being paid by the party so that the revolutionary is able to move freely from place to place, and Mandel talks of members being told by the party to change jobs in order to further the party's aims, or to overcome bureaucratisation.

From such hints we deduce that the professional revolutionary has to be someone who either has no family or possessions, or who is willing to be separated from family/friends, or whose family and possessions are easily moved - all on the instruction of the party. Only a small number of people are likely to meet these criteria, which is one of the reasons why Leninist parties stress "cadre formation" so strongly, and remain so small.

We have two criticisms of this concept, from a personal/political point of view. One is that it excludes, by definition, so many people from active inclusion in revolutionary politics. It either means that you have to be single, or that only one partner in a couple with children can be professionally engaged in politics. The other criticism is that it rests on a self-denying concept of politics - a kind of revolutionary puritanism. Politics is about our lives, not about some abstract commitment to the betterment of the international working class. Politics which leads to the one-dimensional, burnt-out cases who litter the left are bad politics.

d) elitism : As well as arguing for "a stable organisation of revolutionaries that maintains continuity" Lenin argues in 1902 against "primitive democracy" in which all members are involved in all aspects of decision making, and tasks are rotated among members (p 174). The connection between the concept of the "professional revolutionary" and the virtually permanent leadership we see in all Leninist organisations is therefore quite clear. Under the guise of professionalism and continuity, the leadership is able to construct an organisational infrastructure which is geared to its own ideas and methods. Rank and file or oppositional members are put at a distinct disadvantage in relation to the leadership. Elitism and bureaucratisation - the supposed enemies of the revolutionary socialist - find their way into the organisation via its own conceptual apparatus.

#### : 4: Class composition - new movements

Just as Lenin's idea of the professional revolutionary was mainly based on the context of an autocratic state, so his so concept of the programme and organisation of the party was based on a particular constellation of class forces. Lenin believed that the peasantry was, basically, a reactionary force and that the party had to be built on the industrial working class. In terms of organisation and combativity the skilled section of the industrial working class was the most important so far as Lenin was concerned, and this was the focus for party building activity. The interests of the skilled workers - so long as they fought for the advancement of other sectors - were taken as the interests of the whole of the working class.



Post-war European capitalism has brought with it significant changes in class composition, and this makes necessary a radical revision of Lenin's ideas about organisation. First of all, we are not faced, particularly in Britain, with the predictable conflict between the interests of the working class and the interests of the peasantry. Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin were all intent on creating a strong, working class party which could, by one means or another, overcome the reactionary influence of the peasantry. Secondly, the skilled working class has declined in numbers and in political influence within the working class as a whole - although it still maintains considerable economic power. It cannot claim that its interests are automatically the interests of the whole of the class, and no organisation can legitimately be built on this sector alone. Thirdly, unskilled and white collar workers have become far more politically important. The former are often organising themselves with little reference to the usual institutions of the labour movement, while the latter are relatively new to trade unionism and not so limited by its constraints. The unskilled cannot be dismissed as "backward", and the white collar workers - many of whom have historically thought of themselves as middle class - are even less likely to be impressed by the revolutionary militant who "introduces" politics by his or her "intervention" from outside the struggle. Fourthly, the changing composition of the class, the decline of the socialist element in the labour movement, & the inability of the marxist left to analyse the oppression of black people and women in a way which made sense to blacks and women themselves, has given rise to the growth of autonomous movements expressing their interests outside the Labour Party, the Communist Party and the far left groups.

Marxists who want to base their politics on the real situation inside the working class have to face up to these changes and develop new programmes, strategies and methods of organisation which fit the new situation. Of the Trotskyist organisations, only the IS/SWP has advanced beyond the dogmatic Leninist cadre-plus-Transitional Programme concept of organisation - developing more flexible sets of demands and a rank and file style of organising which is better geared to the needs of the day than any of the orthodox revolutionary groups.

Big Flame is attempting to go a good deal further than the SWP in developing a political programme and an organisational method suited to today's class struggle. For a start, we recognise that no small group (and, relative to what is needed for revolution, the SWP is a very small group) can hope to encapsulate the political needs of all sectors of the working class. Since BF cannot analyse the needs of working class and other women sufficiently accurately, it does not claim to offer a full political programme for women. We recognise that the autonomous women's movement is the best judge, despite its limited involvement of working class women. Thus we respect the political and organisational autonomy of women. The same goes for the black and gay movements.

Secondly, we reject the Leninist theory that professional revolutionaries (usually intellectuals) are the major source of correct analysis of class struggle, and thus the main developers of programme, strategy and organisational methods. Workers in struggle - at waged work and in the community - have time and time again proved to be better than the revolutionary group at developing demands and methods. We emphasise that it is the role of the revolutionary individual and group to learn from people in struggle. We don't see the party as simply accumulating disparate experiences and tacking them on to the existing ideas. In particular, the politics of the autonomous movements have to integrated into the whole of marxist politics, suffusing all aspects of our work.

#### : 5 : Seizing power - after the revolution

Lenin worked for, and helped create, a party whose dominant element was committed to an insurrectionary overthrow of the state. When Tony Cliff told the PRP-BR to start an insurrection against the Portuguese left government, he showed that he too believed that, even with a small party, it was possible to take advantage of a severe crisis and topple a government and introduce a system of workers councils. Much more thought has to be put into this question. Big Flame's pamphlets on Chile and Portugal give some preliminary observations on two recent revolutionary situations which have raised severe analytical problems for the European left. "Seizing the Power - a discussion of reformism, revolutionary strategy and tactics" (Bob Duncan and Ian McKenzie, Discussion Bulletin, January 1979) takes up the question

of the role of the left Labour comrades, who propose the combined strategy of electing a left Labour government with militant extra-parliamentary struggle. This strategy implies a long-term approach to building revolutionary forces, seeing the process developing by fits and starts.

The question of whether revolution will take place by insurrection or in a more long term way cannot be resolved in abstract, but only by analysis of the relationship of class forces. We will not speculate about the next ten years here. But one important factor needs to be stressed - the role of the modern capitalist state. We are not facing the war weary bourgeois government which had only just taken over from Zsarist autocracy that Lenin faced. Our state is far more formidably armed, ideologically, technologically and militarily. Today's Leninists point to the overthrow of the Shah to bolster their theory that the masses, when mobilised in sufficient numbers, can overthrow even the most sophisticatedly armed state apparatus. This may be true, but only when certain political conditions are ripe, and in the case of Iran we have to question how close is the connection between the mobilisation of Muslim nationalism and a socialist mass mobilisation.

One other point needs mentioning here. Lenin, as we have noted, advocated the rule of a democratic centralist party after the revolution, on the somewhat optimistic assumption that, in a socialist society, all co-operation would be voluntary. We have to take into account the experience of all societies which have undergone a revolution, and assert the principle of more than one party in the post-revolutionary society. Before the revolution there are bound to be a number of revolutionary parties and autonomous associations, and there is no reason to suppose that all the differing interests which these groupings represent will have suddenly become homogeneous just because a revolution is taking place. While there will have to be an unprecedented degree of class unity for revolution to begin, there will still be many contradictions within the class as a whole - particularly between men and women, and black and white people. Thus there will have to be the guaranteed right of all associations of people - except of those who are attempting to overthrow the revolution - to carry on organising for their own interests.

#### : 6 : The organisation of the party - the limits of democratic centralism

The classic Leninist model for the organisational structure of the revolutionary party is "democratic centralism". This was defined in the 1920 "Theses on the role of the Communist Party in the Proletarian Revolution" as:

"The chief principle of democratic centralism is in the election of the higher party cells by the lower, the unconditional and indispensable binding authority of all the instructions of the higher bodies for the lower, and the existence of a strong party centre whose authority is generally recognised as binding for all leading party comrades in the period from one party Conference to another". (our emphasis)

Quoted by Richard Kuper in "Organisation and Participation"  
in "Socialist Review" July-August 1978

This is the Leninist bible. Yet again, it has to be criticised, from a marxist point of view.

(a) politics, not structure: The basic fault of the democratic centralist model for party organisation is that it sees the question of the internal functioning of the party as a technical, or structural question. Put at its crudest by Chris Harman of the SWP in his reply to Kuper (in the same issue of "Socialist Review"), the argument boils down to say that a centralist structure is the most efficient way of welding party members into a fighting force. More subtly put by Mandel, democratic centralism includes the technical questions of how the party structures itself - what "democratic norms" exist to govern the formation and operation of factions, tendencies etc. But Mandel and Harman are both arguing on the same terrain - that of structure - and so the Fourth International is easily punctured by the SWP barb that it is merely a talking shop, riven and immobilised by factional disputes.

We agree with Kuper, when he says "the real danger of democratic centralism lies in its encouragement of a monolithic and undifferentiated politics". It is a political, not a structural question. The kind of organisation you build flows

from your analysis of the tasks necessary for revolution to take place. Orthodox Leninists see the principle task to be smashing the state, and since the question of the "correct programme" has been solved for them long ago, the task is to build the iron hard cadre who can smash the state.

For us the question is more complicated. We see the ideological power of the state being so strong that most workers are imbued with feelings of intellectual inferiority and powerlessness. Most of us have been trained to accept orders and opinions in a more or less passive way, or to find individual ways of disobeying or disagreeing. We are, in fact, ripe for plunder in the democratic centralist party. Yet revolutionary activity in the modern state requires the very opposite of these qualities. While workers develop in struggle a whole range of progressive and often anti-capitalist ideas while they are temporarily removed from the yoke of the boss and the mass media, they also frequently maintain reactionary views, particularly about race and sex. The revolutionary has to be able to think creatively - and not simply repeat party dogma - in these situations.

The party has to be a training ground for this kind of creative thought. Where democratic centralism so often stifles original thinking and debate, we have to create a structure in which the political principle of open-ness to new ideas, tolerance of diversity, comradely conflict and mutual respect can be taken for granted. It is an equally important political principle - if we are to create a party of human beings rather than machines operated by the levers of the Central Committee - that everyone learns to lead. If members receive adequate theoretical and practical education, and if the organisation is geared to the personal situations of its members, then there should be a rotation of leadership positions, locally and nationally. Bureaucratic safeguards - such as the automatic termination of membership of the national leadership after a certain period of time - may be necessary in the interim, but they would be a disservice to the organisation if they implied that such structural arrangements could solve what is essentially a political question.

(b) democratic centralism in practice : The intention of the previous point - "politics, not structure" - is to show that the theory of democratic centralism must fall because it implies a method of organising which is counter-productive for class struggle. It is not sufficient to castigate Leninist groups because of their day-to-day practice. Nevertheless, their practice does have to be criticised. Sheila Rowbotham's is one of the most effective accounts of the deficiencies of the IS ("Beyond the Fragments"), and Martin Shaw gives a more detailed account in "Socialist Register" (1978).

Democratic centralism finds no time for the idea that the process of transmitting ideas (ie orders) should be subject to political debate. Relationships of authority are in no way problematic, either personally or politically. And there are inherent strains in the democratic centralist model which, as Kuper points out, all inhibit questioning and debate. There is a tendency for the leadership to give the appearance of unity in order to act in the way leaderships are supposed to act - swiftly and decisively. Paying a wage to the leadership gives them the opportunity to work full-time, which allows them to accumulate experience and contacts far greater than that of most rank and file members, which again adds to their authority. The concept also imbues in the membership a respect for the leadership which encourages their own passivity.

The insensitivity, authoritarianism, sexism and general unpleasantness of most leading figures in the Leninist organisations is not accidental. It flows from their political ideas and practices. Big Flame is not immune from any of these defects. The struggle to eliminate them is a political struggle. The struggle continues!

## D. TOWARDS A NEW THEORY OF PARTY AND CLASS

Given these criticisms, what should our position be on Leninism and models of revolutionary organisation? There are certain concepts within the Leninist model that are not specific to particular conditions, but which in part provide many of the general starting points for a revolutionary marxist theory and practice on organisation. These include the necessity for combat, interventionist organisations, with an educated and committed membership. These and other concepts need re-situating inside modern conditions of class struggle, new relations between state, capital and working class. One example of this is the need for the organisation/party to combine in its ranks the leading and most active militants. But this changes according to the changing class structure and capitalist society as a whole. So it is wrong to talk of the party today as simply "a party of advanced workers," as for instance the SWP does. The expansion of the public sector and higher education, the entry of more women into waged work and the intervention of the state and capital into community/home life, all alter definition of the leading militants the organisations must combine.

Other aspects of Leninism were either historically specific or wrong and limited in the first place; notably those factors we dealt with in the previous section. These must be discarded, lessons learnt and new politics developed. It is not relevant today for revolutionary organisations today to define themselves in terms of Leninism. Leninist and anti-Leninist are labels that indicate a refusal to take what is necessary and build from what is not. That is, they are substitutes for a concrete political analysis.

Where do we gain those new elements that are necessary to add? It must be said that in many ways we have been unfair to Leninism and unbalanced in our criticisms. Because Leninism is both the most widespread model and identified with successful revolutions that went wrong, we have structured an evaluation and critique round it. However, if other models of organisation are examined many of the political criticisms - authoritarianism, static concepts of class and struggle, substituting organisation for class etc - can be applied with even more force to them, including the reformist left, anarchism, libertarianism and so on. For instance ultra-left politics which poses socialist struggle and consciousness developing spontaneously are far more guilty of importing a "consciousness from outside" into struggles, which depend entirely on their "clarification" of goals and ideas that do not exist in the real, existing world. And there is nothing more substitutionist than terrorist or 'autonomist' groups, impatient about the pace of the political development of the working class, who "take matters in their own hands" to detonate the working class in whose name they speak.

The political traditions that run parallel to Leninism do not provide a useful starting point for a modern theory and practice of organisation, though partial insights exist in the works of Gramsci, Luxemburg, the utopian tradition of English socialism and the more contemporary libertarianism. It is tempting to search back and forth for alternative "isms," but the harder task of applying marxism to new class struggles and movements, learning from them and enriching marxism in the process will be more rewarding in the long-term. Through all our experiences and mistakes this is the task Big Flame has always set itself. One example of this process is our work in the car industry. Almost from the beginning we identified the car workers as at the centre of the transformation of the composition of the working class, towards the "mass worker," with consequent changes in methods of struggle, organisation and programme. Whilst this led to certain 'excesses' (eg of anti-unionism) it helped us focus on new relations between revolutionary politics and organisation, and rank and file organising that has born fruit in the Ford Workers Group.

However it is from the new, autonomous movements that we can learn most that will aid us to develop new ideas of revolutionary organisation. For many years BF argued that the things which such movements had to by their very nature confront - the division between personal and political, divisions in the working class that were more than ruling class propaganda, the ossified nature of much of marxist theory and politics - alter the way we thought about organisation. It is not so much the structures themselves (the small group/consciousness-raising etc) that are transferable, though they do teach us ways of involving people and avoiding elitism. Rather, it is the content of the organisation and politics. A movement like feminism re-defines socialism. It is not just another section to a programme, but something which affects all areas, allowing us to begin to see how to unite so-called subjective and objective, how to investigate all forms of inequality and so on.

These are of course, areas popularised in "Beyond the Fragments, though as the book says, no solutions are offered. It is in the interaction between the new movements and struggles that traditional and necessary concepts, like cadres and vanguard sectors, will be infused with a different and more flexible meaning. At a more general level, any theory of 'party and class,' has to recognise the permanence and impact of autonomous and independent movements (eg anti-nuclear) on the revolutionary organisations. Instead of the movements being conceived of as subordinate or satellite arms of the party, they should be considered parallel institutions, whose organisational and political independence is respected. However where we may part company with certain interpretations of 'Beyond the Fragments' and of relations between organisation and movements, is on the question of whether the new situation reduces the need for general revolutionary organisation and later party/s. In our view the general revolutionary organisation remains central, its role arguably even heightened, by the growing complexity and diversification of movements and struggles. The mere existence of an organisation with militants in each sector does not guarantee its ability to generalise correctly. But if a revolutionary organisation can generalise from within the dynamic and autonomy of movements and struggles, then its political role as providing linkages of action, strategy and tactics is vital. In a more developed dual power situation, party/s have an even more vital role as the stakes get higher. Sectoral movements can have profound effects on all areas of struggle, but they are inevitably partial in their experience and perspectives. Only a general organisation holds out the possibility through its collective practice, interventions and priorities, of overcoming that partiality in its activity inside the whole of the working class and anti-capitalist movements.

In developing new theory and practice, we have to remember that many of our organisational and political problems are related to our isolation since the defeated revolutionary wave after the 1st World War. This minority position, where revolutionary marxism is dwarfed by reformism, has increased the mistakes and dogmatism, the failure to adapt and build from Leninism and classical Marxism. So, central to political development of our ideas will be strategy and tactics that flow from a recognition of our marginality and the likely possibility of a long period before revolution is a real possibility. In terms of organisation in a narrow sense, this means that we should abandon the idea that revolution will necessarily be lead by a single party, with a monopoly of correctness, that has grown in a linear way from small group to mass party. It is possible that revolutionary tendencies will co-alesce into a pre-dominant party that has a sizeable following inside the working class. But the main point is that we will only clarify a changed concept of party-class relations inside developing mass struggles, where parties are actually built, not announced. Modifications of these aspects of Leninism are appearing grudgingly from the revolutionary movement and extended to recognise the likely multi-party nature of a post-revolutionary situation, though a lot more thinking needs to be done on all the elements mentioned in this section.

One final point; where does this leave democratic centralism? We have already pointed out that the way groups organise is vitally conditioned by their politics - monolithic ideas leading to bureaucratic structures. But structures, even in a narrow sense are important and there are important modifications to democratic centralism that need mentioning. First of all though, it is again worth making the point that someone will always find a different definition of the term. It is important to move the debate away from democratic centralism or not. The core idea of DC, which demands continuity is that of collective responsibility. Having democratically decided on a policy (at conferences etc) it is neither democratic nor effective in class struggle if that policy is not binding on all the members. But the process of decision-making, discussion and implementing policy needs to be more much more flexible and open than in existing functioning of organisations. This means two things in particular. First, that in the process of making decisions, full freedom of exchange of views, of rights of tendency, full participation encouraged by social arrangements for childcare etc, positive discrimination, checks on the power of full-timers - all these and others are encouraged. Second we have to alter the meaning of 'binding' in its effect on implementation of policies. It is usually interpreted as meaning that members of an organisation can only raise doubts and criticisms about the policies of an organisation in private, that is inside the organisation, though many groups have even stifled this. Members should be able to differ from the line/s of an organisation in public, as long as they make clear what is the majority view. It is vital for developing clarity of perspectives in struggles and with the militants outside the organisation that a clear line is presented by the publications, by the leadership and members. But that does not have to exclude public dissent. This strengthens the public relationships of the organisation, because it brings the debate outside and breaks with the appalling history of the Left where independent militants are confronted with mechanical, monolithic politics and interventions in meetings.

The formal idea of DC, with its abstract emphasis on a 'balance' between democracy and centralism, also obscures the problems and functioning of leadership. Just as leadership is necessary in the struggle as a whole, organisations need an elected and accountable leadership. But it is also a question of how the job of leadership is gone about, where its authority is derived from and how it can be critically checked. The most perfect balance in the world between democracy and centralisation does not guarantee that power and initiative will not be centred solely on the leadership. We would like to see the operation of open leadership, which would re-produce party-class relations inside the organisation, so that the movement between leadership and rank and file would be characterised by openness of debate, frankness and good humour, and most crucially the existence of more than one forum for the development of policy in the organisation.

E. WHAT KIND OF AN ORGANISATION IS BIG FLAME TRYING TO BUILD?

We have stressed throughout this article that the problem of organisation is a political problem more than a structural problem. The kind of organisation you build flows from the general political positions you adopt. Since we in Big Flame do not claim to have final, "correct" political positions, we cannot claim to have created the perfect organisational form. Our structural arrangements are described in the short pamphlet "An introduction to Big Flame - our politics, history, structure and publications", on page ten. In this final section, rather than make bland statements about what kind of an organisation we want, I am describing what is wrong with our organisational arrangements and trying to indicate what should happen, in a way which will indicate the kind of organisation we are trying to build.

1: unsolved political problems

It is alarming to note that this is the first document to my knowledge (FR) which has tried to systematically evaluate Lenin and Leninism. We have made statements about "party and class", we have discussed the personal problems of being a revolutionary, we have tried and reconsidered organisational models such as "the base group", we have thought hard about the question of autonomous movements ... but we have only just started to tackle Leninism as such. Perhaps this is the legacy of our regrettable tendency to avoid theory. Many of our members probably have not read Lenin's basic texts. Yet the rejection of some of Lenin's basic theoretical positions - for example his theory that working class consciousness was automatically "trade union consciousness", and therefore revolutionary ideas had to be inserted from the outside - has been a mainspring for BF's theory and organisational practice. On the other hand, we find that we have an increasing need to adopt many basic Leninist formulas: the need to recruit, the need for an elected leadership, the use of rank and file trade union bodies and so on. Unless we make a more serious effort to resolve these problems of political theory, we are going to confuse ourselves and everyone else by an ad hoc, inconsistent set of organisational procedures.

2: the problem of democracy

No-one doubts that BF is a democratic organisation. Some of us voted against having an elected (as opposed to delegated) National Committee, because we feared the emergence of a power crazy leadership, unaccountable to the members. This has not happened, because of the enormous political emphasis on involvement of the membership in all aspects of the running of the organisation. The stress on the role of Commissions as the principal body for developing our policy in each area of prioritised work means that the NC acts mainly as an overall check on the work of the organisation, rather than as the almighty source of political wisdom. Conference determines priorities, and broad guidelines for the organisation as a whole. Branches are recognised as differing in resources, and as the best judge of what is feasible in their area, so are not subject to any decrees from the NC. The three-way interchange between branches, Commissions and the NC is of great importance, so while the NC would be expected to take initiatives, where necessary, on areas not laid down from the previous Conference, there are as many occasions when the suggestion comes from a Branch or a Commission as from the NC. Debate inside the organisation is secured by the right of members to form tendencies, and everyone's right to have their views printed in the Discussion Bulletin. All minutes are circulated in the monthly Information Bulletin.

We have no cause for complacency, however. While the structures

would appear to be satisfactory, they are not always used to their best. The NC more often fails to lead than it exerts too much power. The Commissions sometimes take too long in developing political initiatives, and sometimes become detached from the organisation as a whole, allowing members not involved in that area of work to rest on their laurels thinking that "the ... Commission is dealing with that, I needn't bother". At its worst, people don't bother to read minutes in the Information Bulletin, or take up the ideas coming from the NC or Commissions.

The most worrying upshot of this is that too few people in the organisation are being trained, or training themselves, to take leadership positions - either in the organisation, or in the class struggle. Too few people write articles in the Discussion Bulletin, or work on motions for Conference, or make public speeches, or write leaflets. The problem of leadership is not simply the demagogic aspirations of a few - it is the willingness of the many to let other people, even encourage other people, to make decisions for them. This fundamental aspect of bourgeois "democracy" rears its ugly head in our own organisation.

This is the context in which we have to discuss the question of adopting full-time organisers in BF. They may well help us make the necessary step of becoming a more efficient organisation, able to respond more quickly to developments in the class struggle. They could free members from drudge work and enable them to develop their political skills more fully. The real danger, however, is that they allow members to become more passive, and less involved in making decisions and running the organisation.

We are aiming to build an organisation whose democracy lies not in its Constitutional guarantees of democracy (rights to tendencies, factions etc) but in its political guarantee. That means an organisation whose members are willing and able to play a full part in the politics of Big Flame. This requires an educational programme which ensures that all skills are spread widely throughout the organisation, and a revolutionary commitment from all members to develop their own abilities so that BF becomes a genuine political collective.

### 3: autonomy

A fundamental feature of BF's politics is its commitment to working class autonomy. It is the working class itself which defines its real needs and finds its own organisational forms for struggling against capital for the realisation of its needs. The role of the revolutionary organisation is to be inside each and every working class struggle, helping clarify the demands and developing the tactics necessary for winning that struggle. In short, the class makes the revolution, not the party; and that is why BF says "class first, party second".

It follows from this, and from the recognition that sections of the working class have different needs from others, that we support the autonomy of the movements of black people, gay people, women and youth within the working class. It is not our role - nor, we would argue, is it the role of the revolutionary party - to seek to direct from outside these movements, any more than we would seek to direct the struggle of the working class. We would expect our members inside these movements to help clarify the ideas and strengthen the tactics of these movements, but in the context of respecting their autonomy.

But we are encountering a number of problems with this position, which is resulting in BF becoming marginal to a number of important struggles. If the conflict between women and men inside the labour movement sharpens (an indicator of this process occurred at the TUC abortion demo when women rushed to the front of the TUC leadership)



will BF be able to take a position, or will we leave it to the autonomous women's movement to resolve the problem? What reaction do men in BF take to the increasing threat they feel from the revolutionary feminists? Our principled non-interference with the debates inside the black movement mean that we have only one black member, and yet we aspire to being an organisation which can comprehend and contribute to the whole of working class struggle. Because we have only one black member we feel we cannot legitimately recruit black people, so we stay at square one. We have little or no impact in the struggles of gay people or of youth for similar reasons.

We seem to operate as though there is an inherent conflict between support for autonomous movements and recruitment of people in those movements. Yet we respect working class and women's autonomy, while trying to recruit workers and women. We have to build an organisation which can prove that there is no need for such a conflict. It is possible to intervene without crushing autonomy by manipulation and demagoguery. The point is that we must learn to influence from within, rather than from outside the struggle. There is no need for raiding parties on youth, gays or black people - we work alongside them all the time, and only part of the time do they operate in their autonomous movements. We should have a perspective of recruiting them to BF and learning from them.

#### 4: personal life

Big Flame is trying to build an organisation of communist human beings. We believe in comradely behaviour, in the extension of revolutionary ideas into our personal lives. We are trying to develop a glimpse of future social and personal relationships right now. We want to share each others problems, while respecting their privacy, to learn how to love one another without owning one another, to help our children to grow into better communists than we are.

But we are not very good at all this. As always, the problem stems from insufficient political development in this field. Too often we resort to moral exhortation, when we need a clear, materialist analysis of why such behaviour is occurring. But there are plenty of occasions when uncomradely behaviour takes place simply because people refuse to take criticism to heart and learn from their mistakes. Men act as though they believe that just because BF has what seems to be a "good" position on "women's questions" sexism is magically abolished from their repertoire. Women act as though they believe that men are punch-bags for feminism. Adults "do their bit" on the creche and then forget that children exist.

We don't want an organisation of brown eggs and bicycles. We want people who are tough and tender, assertive and sympathetic, open and single-minded, committed and many-sided. We have a long way to go, but we're going to get there.

#### 5: a serious organisation oriented to the working class

Evaluating Leninism in the context of describing the kind of organisation Big Flame is trying to build has to end by stressing two central features of Leninism to which we are committed. Firstly, that we are serious about building a serious organisation. We have a sense of humour, and we are committed to all the foregoing points about democracy, autonomy and personal life. But BF intends to be taking an active and organised part in the movement which destroys capitalism. For that we need an efficient organisational structure composed of dedicated men women and young people equipped with necessary political skills. Second, we affirm that the organisation has to be part of the working class. This is not just a matter of the social composition of our membership - although it is crucial that we recruit working class people to overcome the preponderance of people of middle class origins. The important thing is that Big Flame has a working class political line. Its politics have to be derived from a working class analysis of class struggle, and the prime activity of our members has to be among the working