

I Beyond the Network

West London Big Flame was one of the few groups able to put into practice the ideas of the 'Project for a new revolutionary organisation', accepted by the 1976 BF Conference. This meant that we were able to bring together a large number of people with whom we had been working in different local campaigns and struggles over a number of years. These people were sympathetic to the political approach and style of BF, but their experiences of the revolutionary Left meant that at the time they did not want to join a national revolutionary party or organisation. The resulting Socialist Network organised a series of local activities for about two years. When the Network started to fall apart, partly as a result of the end of the Project, the more committed decided to start a local socialist community newspaper - BUSH NEWS.

The people who were in the Socialist Network inevitably were and still are our main allies in local campaigns as well as being friends, and we have developed our political ideas together. Some from the Network did join BF and some BF members work on Bush News. In many ways our history and experience prefigured some of the ideas of Beyond the Fragments.

At the same time and a little later others in BF were finding debates with other Left groups at a national level more useful. We felt and still feel that these discussions took the initiative away from BF and its political development. The legacy is an emphasis on responding to outside pressures for 'lines', 'positions', priorities, etc.. While we recognise the demands that joint work and initiatives realistically involve, we think it is often important to resist rather than conform to the political content and style of many other Left groupings and parties. The 'reality' is that Left national organisations are in insecure and often marginal positions and this is not overcome simply by getting the line 'right'. Now more than ever we must be open to learning from the movements, fragments and experience of mass work from which we claim to derive much of our politics.

II Women and Big Flame*

Women and Autonomy

Autonomy should mean that women organise how they like, discuss what they like, etc. rather than be asked by the National Committee to formulate lines on this that or the other. If there were lots of black people in BF would a mainly white NC instruct a Black Commission to come up with a line on immigration controls? Autonomy in a mixed organisation is always a contradiction because

*This document has been written collectively by the branch; the section on Women and BF was written by the women in West London.

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women would leave if we really wanted autonomy. We should recognise contradictory interests: Patriarchy - capital - power, etc.. It's not valuable to pretend that there are no conflicts between socialism, feminism and anti-racism. To support autonomous movements and ignore potential contradictions is..... contradictory! Attempts at unity which ignore contradictions put the onus on the autonomous movements to say where and how they differ. But attempts at unity which recognise the contradictions put the onus on the movements to say what they have in common with other groups. We think this makes more political sense.

We as women don't want to make decisions for men; we want them to take responsibility for those things too. Women's self-determination without letting men get away with not having to think about 'women's issues'. We don't have many black people in the organisation but that doesn't mean we don't discuss black issues and have some perspectives on these. We think that men in BF take the presence of women in the organisation for granted, and we feel that the longer BF remains the way it is the easier it will be for the men in the organisation to wear the tag of 'socialist feminism'. What we want to do is make them earn it - to understand, support, give space, discuss but not sit back on their laurels saying 'It's OK, the women are dealing with that'.

We believe in national revolutionary organisation because we believe that women's liberation is not possible without socialism. In the women's movement we learn confidence and that we have a right to speak about our own lives. In BF this confidence is eroded by the structure and conditions under which we operate.

Women and the National Committee

The constitution provides for a minimum of four women on the NC. Very few people want to stand for the NC but there are more men than women in BF (and this isn't the only reason - also it's a familiar structure for men -) so it's easier to fill men's positions. Pressure falls on individual women who are guilt-tripped into standing because no one else will. What is a structural problem for all women in BF becomes an individual question of: who has the strength to hit the jackpot and cope with the NC for a year? So the terms of participation don't get changed - only the energy of individual women, who undergo tremendous strain coping with all the contradictions on our own, 'keeping up' with the given terms. It's like meritocracy - equal opportunity to knock yourself out - not to be confused with changing the system... Indeed the idea that women must somehow try harder: speak more, write more, etc. is a prevalent one in BF. Women who stand for the NC have felt unsupported by other BF women.

Women and the Women's Commission

Women don't go to the Women's Commission because we don't have a reason for going and if we do go we're not sure why. This is related to women's power in BF - do we really have any? Perhaps women in BF ought to organise federally: have women's branch meetings which reported to a national women's meeting. Other commissions relate to people's jobs, etc. but women are half the

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population and therefore we relate to all sorts of issues as well as being women. We need space to talk about our lives, the way we relate to our local BF groups and workplaces, local organisations, etc. as well as making decisions important to the national organisation. If women discussed issues such as import controls, reformism, etc. on our own first we might feel more confident about offering ideas on these issues than we do now. On the other hand these sorts of topics aren't always relevant to women and we don't want to be made to feel we ought to make them relevant. The sort of things that are always relevant to us aren't established as areas that everyone should seem confident in, in the same way.

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We need to be backed up in our choice of what's relevant to us and what we want to discuss. If we can change the structure and conditions under which we operate, then women will be able to use our energy more positively in BF, and this is what we want to see.

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III National Organisation

We do think it is useful to be in a national organisation:

i) in order to share and learn from experiences between different localities and traditions and to develop collective work and strategies;

ii) to educate ourselves about national/international perspectives (e.g. cuts campaigns, MAC, and solidarity work), and about theoretical arguments which can cut across particular localities and issues thus helping us to clarify our politics at all levels (e.g. relationships between feminism and marxism, sex, race and class);

iii) to clarify and develop politics between BF members involved in the same work and by thus acting together having some impact;

iv) where members are involved in (inter)national campaigns wider than BF where we can intervene and influence bigger bodies (e.g. TOM); and

v) when we are involved in particular struggles whose success relies on national support and when being in a small national organisation realistically helps us to get that support (for example, the contacts in Fords which BF had built up over many years were useful in developing the Ford Workers' Combine and in building up to the '78 Fords Strike: this contrasts with the Steel Strike where, apart from the vital local work done in Sheffield, our lack of local and workplace bases meant that there were no real foundations for national BF intervention and we relied on exhortation and rhetoric).

However it is because of the more negative aspects of national organisation that we are writing this document - partly to fill out some of the background to our motion to Conference and its motivation (not published in the 2nd Conference Bulletin), and partly to contribute to the political and organisational debates

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current in BF.

If we look at some of the areas we listed as useful we can see that there are major shortcomings....

a) Our learning from experiences of different localities and traditions is haphazard, sometimes left to commissions and now seldom discussed in the Discussion Bulletin. And not all areas have effective commissions e.g. Community, Teachers/Education, Anti Racist Anti Fascist.

b) As far as the development of collective work, it seems difficult for such a small organisation to realistically promote collective interventions; most united fronts are dominated by other organisations, and unless we make links with the non-aligned we are marginalised. It's too easy to assume that because of success in TOM and Fightback we can be successful in other national campaigns - both these campaigns are pretty unique. We set ourselves up for defeat and demoralisation if we try and repeat them in very different circumstances.

c) Although our own education is improving we still seem too hyperactive to take time out to consider long-term trends and recent advances in theory. Local branches, given people's heavy workload, find it hard to set time aside for wider discussions and some get pissed off, have less to say at successive meetings, and finally drift away. The Summer School was a step in the right direction but such discussions need to become an integral part of BF. How can we learn from such positive experiences and manage to link educational and political issues and apply them locally?

d) Because of our small size we can make interesting pamphlet interventions in struggle, but have difficulty following them up. Both the Teachers' Commission and the ARAF Commission folded once their pamphlets were written and sold. Although the collective writing of pamphlets are positive experiences, the points made valid, and they were well received on the Left, we have to be aware that pamphlets (and writing in general) can take over from other work.

e) There are still ideas around that seek to impose upon BF the method and structures that are used by much larger organisations. Even if this is not a conscious development, it emerges from the language of NC directives, assumptions about recruitment and the type of people recruited, and, most markedly, in the competing leaderships that dominate the Discussion Bulletin.

We think this emphasis has a history which, as we suggested in our introduction, derives from tensions between the local Project work and national 'necessities'. The combination of the collapse of the Project and the end of the IMG and regroupment discussions, led to a change in our emphasis within, of course, the context of 'the crisis'. This meant a greater emphasis on recruiting as BF ('coming out?'), having a more public presence on the Left (pamphlets, etc.), stressing our line as against the rest of the Left, with the consequent implications for BF of pulling the organisation together in terms of membership, views on issues of Left concern, and the prioritising of our areas of work. Other emphases have been the change in the method of electing the NC, the change in the formal position of women in BF, the use of the word 'party' in relation to the long-term strategy of BF, and the

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formation of a tendency.

These are specific moments in the history of what we see as the 'tightening up' of BF. Along with this there has also been a change in the 'feel' of our politics at more informal and personal levels: the dropping of automatic prioritising of working class and women participants in meetings, the domination of the DB by a small circle of contributors, and the routinisation of the debate between traditional polarisations.

IV Decision-making...

We think that BF rushes into decisions where there has been little exploration and when there is no particular need for those decisions to be made. Sometimes we come out with high-flown principles which bear little relation to practice. Making decisions and having positions often closes debates or defines their limits. Often, and this applies particularly to National Conference, too many decisions are made too hastily on the basis of too little debate amongst too few. If we rush into decisions in this way, we will repeat the pattern of only a few people understanding the issues, and the majority feeling confused and powerless.

We must find ways of not being afraid to express our differences clearly; this would be greatly helped if everyone in BF learned to disagree without getting antagonistic and without stereotyping. Many of us know what it's like to feel - from people's faces, nodding, hand movements, etc. - that many people assume that just because you're from a particular group that they know exactly what you're going to say. We need to discuss, learn and above all listen to each other.

We feel that political discussion is also hampered by traditional views of regarding decision-making as 'summing up' or concluding discussion. We are against making decisions for their own sake or because that's the way we've always done it and we're against impatience with discussing things if necessary again and again; we are for discussing and educating ourselves about issues, themes, strategies and being open to new and often contradictory ideas.

...and Priorities

At present, having made all our decisions at a national level, we are faced with what to do with them. The fact that we've made them implies either that we all carry them all out, or that the organisation implements them. Both alternatives seem impractical without prioritising which decisions we should carry out rather than others. However, there are problems with making priorities. How can we decide priorities democratically? How can we decide who does what? What is the status of non-prioritised decisions and of those working in these areas? And how can priorities be meaningful as presently decided and in an organisation the size of BF?

In West London these problems have usually been very practical. For example, we have had to consider who could/should stop doing what and start working in a new area; also new members have nearly

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all been heavily committed to political activities when they join. It's important to work around international solidarity work and unemployment, but do we give up anti-cuts work, long-term work with a tenants' association, Bush News or Women's Aid...? Then we've sometimes found that national BF priorities are not all very relevant in a declining inner city area with little industry. And we've faced the danger of all working in separate areas and losing the benefits of working together with other members of BF.

We can see the value and importance (in theory) of BF responding quickly to changes in the class struggle, and of BF as a national organisation working on the same problems in different geographical areas. But we think that discussions on priorities often play down certain strengths of BF's past practice. We think it is vital to do long-term work in particular areas, slowly building up contacts; we never want to be seen as an organisation or groups that flit from campaign to campaign when the going's good. We have to be sensitive to the strengths and weaknesses of organisation in our area, the needs and expectations of local militants. And, while we must avoid 'routinism', we must also avoid alienating people we work with; this means, for instance, carefully choosing the time to withdraw from something we may feel is not going well according to what is happening in the group itself, and not just because some other area of work has been prioritised.

We want to encourage the making of meaningful priorities at a local level relating these to assessment of political and personal resources, and then to a national/international context. At present decisions and priorities made at National Conference are not taken seriously because they can't be, they're unrealistic, they don't work, and they become meaningless (and this casts doubt on the meaningfulness of many of our other discussions). We are against the way national priorities are presently formulated, and we feel that there needs to be much more reflection on decision-making and prioritising, why and how decisions are made, and who really makes them both formally and informally.

V National Conference

It appears hardly necessary to detail the limitations of national conferences and we are encouraged by and support the demands from the Women's Commission, Industrial Commission and some branches and aggregates for changes in the organisation of this one.

The present Conference structure - and this includes everything from the way the Conference operates, pre-Conference material is presented, etc., to the larger questions of organising under patriarchy and capitalism - leads to the Conference being for many a thoroughly alienating experience. People feel unconfident about speaking to large numbers, the debates are drawn from motions and motivations which are similarly limited in that people feel unconfident about writing, partly because what is written and the way it is written is often mystifying. The debates and issues raised by them are often only two-sided i.e. a motion and one alternative, the framework thus defining the debate and the choices which again are not necessarily either relevant or 'real'; (remember all the suspending of standing orders and scrambling for

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compromises at the '79 Conference?).

VI National Committee

It is obvious that our present way of producing an NC is not working very well. The first elected NC suffered four resignations and two other NC members said they wanted to resign but had been 'beaten to the post'. NCs have not operated at their full quota; the present one would have had less members if some had not successfully argued for the creation of a shared post. We have already mentioned how some people, especially women, only stand because pressurised to do so. Anybody who does stand at present is certain to get on to the NC regardless of their political or geographical position within the organisation. One side-effect of all this and people's reluctance to stand for the NC is that any notion democratic 'elections' goes out of the window.

During the WLB/NC meeting in June there was criticism made of groups who had not produced candidate(s) for the NC. While recognising other ways of being involved in the organisation nationally (e.g. in commissions), this fact was said to be a reason why branch communications with the NC were generally poor. We think that the NC is isolated from the membership - partly because people on it are labouring under a too heavy workload and part of this is the burden of national priorities, and partly because the NC has become structurally isolated from BF and no amount of enthusiasm or good-will can overcome this.

Generally we think that the style and content of an NC should reflect:

- i) agreement and understanding of what BF actually consists of and represents;
- ii) agreement about what we want it to become in the next few years; and
- iii) agreement on some kind of strategy about how to achieve our short- and medium-term aims.

The debates around political content and structure will have to reflect such agreements, and are bound to result in compromises between what we want to achieve and what we are capable of achieving; thus discussions on tasks and strategies will have crucial bearing on our theories and practice.

VII Conclusion(s)

Commissions, events such as the Summer School, the Industrial and New Members' Weekends and regional Women's meetings all represent, for us, more positive forms of organising. While the reference point for the commissions and the various collectives is national, the difference between these groups and the National Conference and the National Committee is one of the focus of their work. We feel that such groups and events are:

- a) immediate to the participants, as they often represent a forum in which we develop ideas and activities which in turn inform and

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are informed by our practice: many of these events include a positive commitment to personal politics and give people time and space to discuss the subtleties of personal experiences and political differences in a supportive atmosphere;

b) focussed, by definition, on specific themes, tasks and/or perspectives; and

c) accountable through participation and reportbacks to the organisation.

We feel that such groups, their work, their decisions and their priorities are in practice more immediately relevant and personal, more focussed and more directly accountable than are, at present, either the National Conference or the National Committee. As well as discussing the possibilities for change in the national structures, we should also think seriously about making explicit the political and social roles that various groups and events have and could have within BF.

We do not want to pre-empt debates on and in the organisation which we suggest in our motion are necessary (e.g. concerning elected/federal/delegated leadership/co-ordination/executive and its tasks, organisation, etc.). Neither are we kidding ourselves that we have a magic formula which will immediately solve the problems we've outlined. We are not organisation freaks: we do not think that by tinkering with the structures alone we can 'get it right' politically; equally we are not arguing about structures in the abstract. We maintain that the limitations of our organisation and its structures which we experience are political and are central and this is why it and they have to change. The fact that there are problems which may take a long time to solve does not mean that we can continue to accept their existence and how they affect us and our political work.

As was pointed out in the section on Women and the National Committee, we should not question why women don't stand for the NC, rather we must question what it is about the nature of the organisation and aspects of it, such as the NC, that is not conducive to women expressing experiences. Thus we must examine both the structures within which such problems are experienced and the content of those structures e.g. speaking, writing, having the time to read, organising, etc.. We must look at ways of enabling each other to participate in all aspects of the organisation and in developing other aspects in the way and to the extent we want.

"Structures develop whether you like it or not and it is far better to be in control of them than to be controlled by them". SL comrade, Discussion Bulletin June 1978.

As revolutionaries we are committed to being self-critical and to challenging not reinforcing traditional male-dominated power structures both in theory and in practice. So LET'S DO IT!

West London Big Flame