

Introduction

The following article is written by one member of the NC trying to assess our personal experience of a year on the NC, as well as the way the NC worked for BF as a whole. There has been helpful comment from many members of the NC, but finally the responsibility for what it says is my own. It is meant to be both encouragement to other members to stand for the NC and also to demystify some of the NC's work and activity.

Early experience of the NC

When we were first elected to the NC most of us felt rather overwhelmed by the idea of this enormous responsibility that we carried, as if we might lead the organisation into terrible blind alleys. However we also felt pleased at having a vote of confidence from other members of the organisation. In the event, over the year, we've found that it's really no big deal at all. We're not suddenly transformed into super-people just by virtue of being on the NC. What we have developed is a much deeper sense of working closely with a fixed group of people over a period of time. The discussions have been that much more rewarding because they were ongoing arguments. We could develop ideas, take into account the changing political context and listen to each other rather than just assume we knew in advance what each person was going to say.

Democracy of organisation

The politics of BF certainly helped this process in that no-one was out to take the meetings over. We had a rotating chairperson, so that even though the meetings sometimes became heated and squabbly, we all shared the strain of trying to keep order.

However, the NC was not just about organising our meetings, but also a political learning process for its members. We have all, but the women in particular, developed our self-confidence over the year. It is a pity that this part of the process has been interrupted by a snow-balling of bureaucracy in BF and the organising of the conference. At the end of the year, people are just beginning to get into their stride, particularly the women - but now, like the rest of the organisation, we seem to be struggling to keep up with deadlines and motions. The discussions at the beginning of the year were more fruitful, because people had time to prepare for them. Individuals wrote introductions to specific discussions and we circulated relevant articles, sometimes from sources other than BF.

In our more recent discussions, there has often been a sense of disappointment that we haven't been able to cope with all the work and have substantial political discussions. We had started off with high hopes of putting together all the input from BF as a whole, and developing strategies and perspectives that would be useful throughout BF. None of us were under any illusion that we could draw up a plan of action which would then be carried out by the organisation at our command.

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But we did feel that we had been elected to develop and clarify discussion in BF in between conferences, according to the priorities and perspectives that had been voted on. However, we couldn't do this, and also do all the administrative work that was expected of us, and it is for this reason that the NC has put forward its suggestions for an administrative committee.

Relationship to branches

Over the year, we found that we had an uneven relationship to branches. Demoralisation has been the key-note from Liverpool, and there has been strong criticism of the NC from West London. Nottingham has sent us regular letters and motions. Other branches have a more irregular relationship, sometimes treating us as a bit of a joke, sometimes asking us for information or advice. North London has taken its relationship to the NC very seriously, in always sending a member to support their NC delegate. They have found the experience useful in terms of familiarity with the NC, both for its functioning in the present and for members thinking of standing in the future. We were unable to resuscitate either the Brighton or Leamington branches.

As members of the NC, we developed much more of a sense of responsibility for everyone in the organisation, and also a feeling that we knew a lot of people personally. Although it is rather frightening and tiring to be asked to speak at meetings as a member of the NC, it is also amazingly rewarding to realise just how many good comrades there are around the country. Most of us felt that if humanly possible, we would have like to have made more visits to members around the country.

The urgent need for the branch questionnaire grew out of the generality of the directives from the conference, as well as our sense of responsibility for BF as a whole. We felt a need to know exactly who was BF, so that we could know what was possible for us to achieve. In the event, the results of the questionnaire reflected the unevenness of the branches, in the sense that some branches never bothered to answer and some gave a very realistic ^{but} and also an optimistic account of themselves. We were unable to really tie together the answers from the questionnaire, not only because of lack of time, but also because of a difficulty in coming to grips with the relationship between the branches and the NC.

This difficulty is reflected in the problems we have in getting people to stand for the NC. It is as if being on the NC isolates you from the rest of BF rather than being seen as a process of political growth. Two things seem to be fairly important here. One is the urgent need for an education programme in BF, a programme that sees education in terms of both theory and practice, group discussion and collective activity. The report from the education group should help if its taken seriously enough. ~~The other is~~ The other is for

a much clearer link between local responsibility and being on national bodies. In other words, it should be seen as a fairly natural progression for people to be ~~on~~ gaining experience on branch committees and then on bodies for the organisation as a whole, rather than a conflict or polarisation developing between local and national organizing.

Relationship to commissions

It is obviously an important part of BF's politics that the perspectives and strategies developed by the commissions play an important part in the general political discussions of the NC. For this reason, at the beginning of the year we allocated responsibility for a particular commission to each member of the NC. This was to ensure some consistent liason between the commissions and the NC. This has not worked well over the year and needs to be reassessed by the whole organisation. Firstly, there are the 'ordinary' commissions, like the industrial, public sector, Irish, international and so on. There was not a sustained feed-back from these commissions because of the irregularity of the minutes and of the meetings themselves. At one point we suggested that commissions should meet at a specific regular time in between NC meetings, but this didn't happen. It is important for BF to realise that our experience of the last year, when people became exhausted by the number of day schools and attendance dropped off at the end of the year, that we have to get over the bogy of bureaucracy. We are beginning to get too big and diverse for all our discussions to take place face to face. We need to have a minimal structure so that meetings take place at a regular time, people can be delegated to take part and discussions can be recorded. This is actually much fairer if ^{other} terms ^{such as children} of helping people to participate equally who have more personal commitments, and would make it easier for all the commissions to play a part in developing BF's strategy.

Secondly, there is the relationship of the women in particular on the NC and the women's commission. We (the women) felt very isolated on the NC from other women in the organization, not to say resentful and unsure. The problem is that if we don't have a link with women in the organization, all our personal insecurity comes out and we do feel like token women stuck on the NC for form's sake. We didn't feel that we could go to the women's commission as well as the other national meetings we were supposed to go to, but we wanted some kind of communication. The problem is probably the same as for the other commissions, in the sense of people not realising that we need to work to make links between the different sectors of BF, but of course, because of the total importance of women's contribution to politics in BF, we felt the lack particularly acutely.

It is ironic that the time that the women's commission did come to the NC ~~wasn't~~ there developed an argument over women's autonomy in BF.

The argument is over what the autonomous women's struggle means within Big Flame. For some women it seemed to mean separate organisation of women under the umbrella of Big Flame. However, in discussions at the Summer School, and over the production of 'Walking the Tightrope', the consensus seemed to be much more that we are engaged in a political discussion which gives equal value to the contradictions of sex and class. This implies that it is not an organisational or bureaucratic power in that the whole organisation understands how to apply an anti-sexist critique to all political practise. The women's commission wants more than just rubber-stamping in B.F.

However, the argument which arose out of proposals from the women's commission to the NAC conference, only emphasised to women on the NC the difficulties in communicating for women in BF. This difficulty is reflected now in the fact that we can't get women to stand for the NC. We felt a responsibility for this, in that somehow the experience and confidence gained by older members out of earlier struggles was not passed on to newer members. (For more comments on women in BF, see the articles from the Manchester sisters in Conference Bulletin no 3). It comes back to a question of political education. It also comes back to seeing taking part in BF as a national organisation as part of an organic growth, from individual membership to local committees to national collectives like the commissions, the NC and the Journal, and the newspaper.

A digression on joint candidates

Particular mention has to be made of the joint status of the comrades from Leeds, who took turns to come to the NC with one vote between the, because of their family commitments. This was an experiment for BF, and while personally I sometimes found it frustrating that we couldn't have equally good people at the same time, it was definitely much better than having neither! The rest of us on the NC felt confident that they did actually closely discuss what happened on the NC and in BF, rather than that one of them came without knowing what happened the previous time.

Autonomous movements, Beyond the Fragments, and BF

Very briefly, to conclude, over the year it has become clear that our priorities are too wide in that we seem to be over-ambitious in what we can do given our size. It's not that the priorities are wrong. It's more we need more confidence in our political identity. What seems to me to have happened is that the relationship between BF and the autonomous movements has changed. The autonomous movements have become more diverse, some are weaker, some are more specialised and all of them have very different views of the need for socialism, sometimes with a clear hostility to organisations. To some extent, BF has been dependant on a strong clear voice coming out of these autonomous movements to give a lead to and enrich our overall socialist strategy. Now that those voices have become more diverse, we have to be clearer about what we mean by BF's synthesis as a revolutionary socialist organisation of these different sectoral perspectives. We also need to give our members more grace to grapple with the whole range of contradictions in capitalist society, rather than expecting a total immediate grasp of all the problems. Some of the articles in 'Walking a Tightrope' show how people have found BF useful for their political development. At the Beyond the Fragments conference many people in BF felt glad to be in an organisation that had joint discussions on a shared basis, faced with the rich experience but hesitant outcome of the day in Leeds.

Finally...

Just to say that most of the members of the present NC have reluctantly agreed to carry on if there are not enough candidates to stand at the conference. However, this would be on a temporary basis, and might involve changing the method of election onto the NC. The suggestion is that members of the NC should change on a rolling basis, as new candidates find the time and confidence to stand. This would ensure continuity on the NC, and mean less pressure to find a whole slate of candidates at once.