

## SEARCHING FOR A PERFECT PAPER:

### An Introduction;

Time will just fly by between you reading this and the onset of the newspaper dayschool, you can be sure of that. The following is the first contribution to the discussion leading up to it. Hopefully, the following bulletin in April will be full of responses to it and a whole host of other writings on the subject.

It would have been nice to start off with a stack of provocative proposals - "that the newspaper should be independent of BF", "... .. cease to exist", "become a 30-pager" etc. but the collective itself has not discussed things that far. What we want to do, therefore, is to map out the different areas, all of which we see as important, we would like people to be thinking, talking and writing proposals about. Where comment here extends beyond the simple statement of fact, the views are those of the writer of this article and not of the whole collective (except where indicated). One of the reasons for the dayschool, after all, is to elicit the sort of reaction/feedback that we need to direct and produce the paper and I don't think the collective would wish to pre-empt that by jumping to hastily-reached conclusions.

### Writing for the Left? For the Masses? For Who?

One of the essential indicators of whether we are presently producing the sort of paper that people want is SALES. And one of the most depressing features of the last Conference for me was the uneven impression of sales around the branches that I picked up on. Sales have been stagnant at around 2000 for a long time now (The Anti-Nuke cover sold an extra 500 quite easily though). Why? As in writing and production - though the last few months have seen a distinct improvement here - the responsibility for sales in a given area too often seems to fall consistently and disproportionately on only a few members. In some places, I get the impression that the mere arrival of the paper is an unwelcome fact; in others it seems to have the role of some kind of internal news magazine. This has got to change. If the reasons for people not selling spring out of the kind of paper that BF is or isn't, then let's discuss those reasons and put through or have a go at the changes that may be necessary, however radical.

### A Traditional Polarization.

As long as I've been in BF, discussing the newspaper has brought out the tired old polarity between "a paper for the left" and "a mass paper". This has often found a correspondence in the further magazine/newspaper polarity. Nobody has ever explained very well what these terms mean, what their precise implications for content, style and distribution are - not very well anyway. Having recently come across some of the proposals for the Labour Party dayschool and also Kimberley's document (this bulletin?) I'm slightly worried that we're all due for another dose. Maybe it's therefore a relevant time to ask just how real the polarization is. At the dayschool I'll be happy if the basis for the discussion is a realistic assessment of our experience of selling, talking about the paper. A discussion that is informed more from what our actual practice suggests than what we think the paper should be.

### London: A Jaundiced View.

Most of the feedback I get about the paper, and most of it is very good, comes from committed 'lefties' and activists I already know inside the political circles I move in. Most are already committed to specific areas of activity, be that women's organizations, solidarity work, cuts campaigns, squatting groups or other political parties-

Other people in London do sell enthusiastically at their workplaces, on their estates and so on but on the whole it seems that our readership in the metropolis overlaps considerably with that of The Leveller, Spare Rib and similar publications. Now, I've probably been in London too long, and I've no intention to infer from the above that that is the only readership we should have. Many of us in London do not get the chance to assess how the paper goes down with industrial workers to take just one example and I am looking forward to hearing from comrades at the dayschool who can bring that sort of experience to bear on what we eventually decide.

Big Flame? Who are you then?

One thing I am convinced of - and this is what frustrates me most about people who refuse to or avoid selling the paper - is that it is the single most important route through which others find their way into involvement with/membership of BF as an organization. No publicity stunts project us into the public eye through TV, Radio or the National press. The rest of the left hardly writes volumes about us. We have to do it ourselves. I don't wish, in saying this, to belittle the invaluable contacts made through working with people in campaigns, meetings and so on. But I will insist that the point at which we find ourselves holding up or offering the paper for sale is the highest point of BF's PUBLIC political profile and, therefore, quite obviously, the point at which people are most likely to start taking an interest - I'm personally unprepared to entertain an endless stream of exhortations to bring more people into BF, "to give the organization a higher profile" unless the people doing the exhorting are prepared to back this up with exemplary selling of our newspaper.

This doesn't have to mean doggedly sticking at it through rain and snow on patches where experience guarantees a maximum of one sale every two hours. (Though you'll never know till you've tried). But it does mean, at least, taking the paper into as many of the contexts of your own political activity as possible - at home, at work, on marches, to meetings etc. If being in BF means having something to offer at all then surely the least we can do is to use every opportunity to offer it.

.....and what have you got?

I see two essential functions that the newspaper should always attempt to perform.

(i) It should be the sort of paper that can be sold by the activists/militants we sell to. Or at least that they will want to show around. This argues fairly obviously against over-intellectualization (ouch!) - more of this under style - and also, I believe against an over-obsession with what the rest of the left is doing. Most of the people we might sell to are unlikely to have any clearer an idea of who or what the IMG/SWP/Militant are than they do about us. To take an example - if we want to write about the current rush to join the Labour Party (already tailing off I suspect) then we should write, not about whether it is right or wrong for the IMG to be joining the LP, but rather why we see it as being important to be in BF while others are doing so. Generally, I think, we have an excellent record on (a lack of) sectarianism/left-obsessionalism (ouch again), but a lot of assumptions about what people already know/are familiar with are still made. I agree with Kimberley here that a lot more of the basic arguments can be fruitfully made - "Why Troops Out/Self Determination", "Why we should argue against Import Controls", "Why the U.S is in El Salvador" etc. and can be made most profitably in the paper.

(ii) Not making assumptions is even more essential when we come to the second major function of the newspaper which should be to generalize, to clearly show the links between, e.g., local, national and international issues, between sexual politics and political organization, between feminism and republicanism. So that an activist in say housing

anti-racist work finds the whole paper useful and not just the bits they are particularly concerned with.

The pursuit of such clarity raises several points in relation to both content and style and I'll attempt to outline some of these here.

#### A need for different kinds of articles.

One tendency the current paper has is to become a collection of news-reports. In one sense this kind of paper is easier to produce; it does n't involve planning further ahead than the next issue. But what it can lead to is a rather flat and dull read. This is not purely a question of style. Newsreports themselves could take on much more significance if set in a well-prepared, well-explained context. What I mean is that there is a need for more of the following kinds of article;-

- (a) Practical political guidance as to how to work in particular sectors, in trade unions, solidarity work, tenants assoc's etc.
- (b) Raising difficult questions - eg on violence, on armed struggle, on sexism at work.
- (c) Practical manual type material on eg how to produce leaflets, take photos, flypost, deal with the Law, operate a duplicator, projector.
- (d) Serialized articles. Some things just can't be said in half a page and it's important to recognize that. Recently I've noticed a strong lack of background industrial arguments. Serialized sections (partly rewritten if necessary) from "Organising To Win" could surely fill this gap quite well. Other pamphlets could be plundered in the same way. And what ever happened to the series of short, pithy pamphlets I recall voting for on several occasions. Put 'em in the paper say I.
- (e) More speculative stuff - Posing socialist alternatives, pre-figuring socialism from present realities/beginnings. Did conference really vote to prioritize areas such as new technology, workers' plans, nuclear power. Show me the evidence of that in the paper.
- (f) More interviews - these are often the most readable parts of the present paper.
- (g) More about OUR ORGANIZATION. Reports from weekend/Day/new members schools, good public meetings, paper sales. BF History. BF's International Links - descriptions of the groups we work with. Better publicity for the Journal and Pamphlets.
- (h) Debate. Often presenting two or more, possibly contrasting, even conflicting views on the same subject - to give the paper more of the appearance of a forum for discussion. At the moment the letters page has to try to perform this function and sometimes it just don't happen at all. "Our line should be to encourage discussion" as one cde. recently said to me.

#### Doing it with Style.

Looking for this kind of accessibility, a dry and humourless paper is out. Articles can, with a bit of care, be written like good leaflets - snappy, direct and clear - and should be wherever possible. We still get lots of stuff written in a dense and formal, dare I say Discussion Bulletin style. Some features, as I've said, need to extend beyond the present size of articles. But there's also a need for more shorts. The following categories are just a few suggestions that members of the collective have recently made.

- (a) Ugly Face of Capitalism shorts - statistics, quotes, company reports, shady deals on the Stock Market. Labour Movement perks etc. often speak volumes.
- (b) Funnies - so easy to find in your average provincial/local newspaper and elsewhere or in life itself.
- (c) More regular columns, like dear Torrid McTorment; Suggestions include - A Your Body, Your Health column - smoking, cycling, food,

industrial hazards etc./Incidents from Labour History/Big Flame 10 years ago/Tv Review.

(d)An enlarged, livelier letters section. Feedback to articles/ continuation of debates/Suggestions and comments on the paper itself.

(e)A greater number and shorter film/book/theatre reviews - unmarred by London parochialism. There's no point in reviewing eg. films that are never going to be shown outside The Metrolops.

(f)We should positively encourage fiction/short stories/poetry/ cartoons/even holiday (anyone still have them) stories.

#### Settling down to a familiar style

The Collective has regarded the period since Conference as one for education and experiment. Most of those now regularly involved in production have increased skills they either half-had or didn't have at all. Hopefully, in time, this will enable us to spread the production process in time - farming out feature pages to be laid out, one, maybe two, months, in advance. Stylistically, we are still experimenting but after the dayschool feel that it is important to settle down to a fixed and familiar style. Some of the things we wish to institute are -

(a)Retaining the front page as a strong visual one, not too cluttered with text, more like New Musical Express than SM or SC.

(b)Reducing the average word length on a page from around 1600 (present estimate) to closer 1000/1100, making room for more photos and graphics and SPACE around things.

(c)Stricter limits on the variety of typefaces used for headlines, byelines, typeset copy etc. Anyone with any favourites, speak now. Special Features and the Front Page are different, They should get more scope.

(d)Six or even Seven-Column pages to help distinguish news from features. (At the moment the standard is Five to a page).

(e)Clear indications, using logos, 'topic-heads' etc, of what each page or article about except where its incredibly obvious, so people can turn to what they want immediately and find it. Consistent logos for series, regular columns etc.

SOME OF WHAT WE HAVE SAID ABOVE, SORRY I, CARRIES IMPLICATIONS FOR A LARGER, EG, 20-PAGE PAPER. THAT'S ALL WELL AND GOOD BUT THE FURTHER IMPLICATION OF THAT IS A RISE IN PRICE, REGARDLESS OF INCREASES ENFORCED BY INFLATION. THERE IS ALWAYS RESISTANCE TO A PRICE-RISE BUT WITH THE POSSIBILITY THAT THE COLLECTIVE TRANSLATES THIS SUGGESTION INTO A PROPOSAL, IT IS ESSENTIAL THAT WE HAVE YOUR IDEAS ON THAT AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.

There are lots of things which remain unsaid here; there is neither time nor space to go into them all here. The March and April Bulletins contain most of what the Collective wishes to say about copy deadlines and recent experience shows that the message is at last sinking in. Hopefully the Bulletin will become a regular feature, maybe in future accompanied by a sort of instant feedback questionnaire for branches to complete and send back. The dreaded word - FORTNIGHTLY - has not come up because the present Collective could not possibly consider it from a Resources and Finance point of view. A monthly overstretchs us enough and we nearly all have full-time demanding jobs into the bargain. In my opinion the full-time/part-time worker suggestion falls alongside this. FINANCE is dire. We won't increase circulation without covering costs better: efforts in terms of standing orders/benefits/other fundraising have been simply appalling. And, by the way, did you realize that OCTOBER's paper will be Issue Number 100 - any ideas.

See you at the Dayschool - Terry McNiven (slbf and Newspaper Collectivee).