

CHILDREN AND SOCIALISM : OPENING PLENARY SESSION

((Note on method of recording this session:
No names are given, because I didn't know everyone's names.
The contributions are listed as 'points', and the numbers indicate where I think a separate issue has been raised. Where possible I have broken the text with my own sub-headings.
The prepared introductory talk was held over til the after noon session because a lot of people arrived late, so this opening plenary was fairly unstructured.))

1. The issue of having and looking after children was talked about a lot in Big Flame a few years ago - we discussed and were involved in nursery campaigns, questioning the type of childcare, working out our own ways of bringing up kids, all these kinds of things, and yet now, when more of us have kids, these things seem to be getting ignored.
2. It's not just a question of childcare : it is bigger than this - questions about how children are treated in society, the situation of youth, the growth of the appeal by organisations like the National Front to young people.
3. What we need is a whole cultural offensive to make socialism real for young people and children. We've got to get away from the situation where socialist activity for young people seems to be simply organising them to go and beat up the NF. This problem involves everyone, not just the left.

Bringing up children as socialists

4. We should talk about the difficulties of bringing up your children as socialists, when so few people around them are socialists. Finding a way of supporting our kids when they have such different standards thrown at them: what they get from their friends, what they get from us, the ideas they get from teachers etc. And we need to talk about the pressures we feel on us as socialist parents. It won't make any difference what we say to our kids about things like racism and the NF unless we can find ways of putting our ideas into practice.

* Socialism is not something fixed which we can "give" to our children. It is something which we create in the process of trying to organise our lives in a pre-human way. Marx forgot about reproduction - he just talked about production; but production depends on reproduction, and this has to become a major issue for us as socialists.

* There's a problem of trying to create an ideal world for kids. We should also remember what we need as parents. The main thing, I think, is not to insulate kids from the world, finding a little socialist paradise at home (even if this were possible!), but to create a situation for them in which they are encouraged to question everything, including the way that we do things. We shouldn't force our socialism on them in the way that our parents forced their conservatism on us. So that when they get into situations which are far from ideal, like school, then they have the resources to question things.

* We shouldn't repeat the idea of child psychologists like Bowlby who maintain that children need their parent(s) with them all the time, by us assuming that they won't become socialists unless we are nurturing them every minute.

Non-parents and kids

5. I'd like us to talk about the relationship between people who aren't parents to parents and their children. This isn't talked about. I live with a mother and her child, and another woman, and I sometimes want to make comments about what's going on with the child, but I don't feel that I can, and this is very difficult.

* This is a major contradiction. If we are at all serious in our efforts to re-structure child-care, this has to be discussed in some detail.

State nurseries

6. People on the left don't seem to know much about the function of state nurseries. They are often wrongly assumed to be progressive, when all sorts of terrible things are done to children in these places - they should be challenged. Perhaps this could happen via the new National Childcare Campaign.

* This provides a link with the fight against the cuts. Sheffield council is going in for new methods of child-care, which has some good aspects, such as increasing parental involvement, but this is part of its real aim to provide the "service" on the cheap.

* We're not after the replacement of one set of capitalist institutions with another. We want to change all social relationships. We don't simply want better buildings, better adult-child ratios, we want an entirely different approach to bringing up children.

* There's a problem with the completely new approach. We were involved with a "free" nursery, one which we ran ourselves, according to our own principles, but we couldn't keep it up because there was so much work involved in running it. We couldn't help run the nursery and do full-time^{paid} work as well.

* It's hard to talk about alternatives when women have so few choices available to them. We have to fight to keep nurseries open whatever they're like - and fight to make them better. After all, state nurseries are no worse than schools. My kid goes to a child-minder, and I sometimes wonder if I should try and find a socialist child-minder, but it really comes down to who is available, and who the child likes being with.

Bringing up children and doing revolutionary politics

7. How many people here have committed socialists as parents? (Only two hands go up, out of fifty or so people!). This shows that there is something wrong with the system our conservative or liberal parents used: they didn't have much success transmitting their ideas to us, did they? My conclusion from this is that the childcare process is uncontrolled, and often unconscious. We should take seriously the fact that the possibilities for us transmitting our socialism to our children are very limited.

* This brings up Mary Carter's letter to Socialist Challenge (15.5.80: Mary describes the lack of sympathy she got from her comrades about the conflict of doing politics and looking after her children; the resentment her children expressed about her being out so much; and her conclusion that she would have to

stop spending so much time at meetings etc, and concentrate instead on making her children become revolutionaries. The letter was reprinted in the BF Discussion Bulletin "Children and Socialism" which was circulated before the Day School).

- * I don't think it is possible to do what Mary Catter says she's going to do - I don't think you can bring up your children as socialists. But we can begin to think of what we want of the future : trust, comradeship, a questioning attitude etc; and we can try and pass on these things in the way that you deal with children. So I disagree with the comrade who said it was an unconscious process ; I think there is some control. If we enquired carefully enough of all of us here, we would probably find that we had something in common in our upbringing, despite all the differences in our backgrounds, which made us what we are today, socialists, together.
- * Another thing about Mary's letter is that lots of people go to meetings every night, and they aren't socialists - my dad for instance. The point is to explain exactly why you are doing this or that, and not to feel guilty if the child questions the validity of what you're doing.
- * But it's not so simple. As far as my kids are concerned , being in Big Flame means being at meetings or being on the phone when they want me. We have to find ways of doing our politics which don't exclude them - we should do more things with them.
- * It is also a matter of the adults treating each other in a socialist and comradesly way. This has a big impression on kids, they pick up on it, and notice how you are with others.
- * You also get this problem when there aren't kids in the house. The other adults that I live with also complain about me being at meetings all the time. We shouldn't home in on kids in an exclusive way - it's not natural to separate kids and adults : it's an ideological, artificial division.
- * When I read Mary's letter, I thought that I'm sure a lot of kids say things like "you should have had an abortion" to their mothers, like Mary's kid did. The problem is that she sounds as though she lacks support, and scit's very easy for her, like all women in thatsituation, to feel very guilty. Everywhere people feel unconfident about bringing up children. We should remember that there are lots of toher contexts for kids to grow in, apart from the family.
- * But doing these things in other ways depends on so many practical factors like the kindof housing available, what their friends say, which often puts pressure on them. We are forced to individualise th ings much more than we want, even when we don't like what we are doing.
- * When I read that letter in Socialist Challenge I felt that we, the left, had failed her, made life impossible for her. Big Flame is better now than it was in this respect. But unfortunately collective arrangements don't work in everyday life all the time. They may work for a Conference or a Day School - but the collective repsonse isn't there all the time, day to day. You can see from what Mary Carter's comrades failed to do.
- * Women in her position have to feel very confident to make demands on otherpeople, even when people offer to help.

"I feel bad if the kids wake up when someone's baby-sitting, even though I know they don't mind. It is interesting that "childhood" isn't a concept in the Third World like it is here : kids are a part of life and work, they learn about life and cooking and looking after children not as play, but as what they have to do. We are too far away from this idea. We should credit children as human beings, expect more of them in things like helping in the house.

* It's intolerable if collective help isn't available in the day-to-day, crif it doesn't work. Often non-parents have no contact with children, and are often in fact excluded - but they need to have contact and could take on much more. We've also got to acknowledge that croches often aren't suitable; and arrange baby-sitting not just for meetings, but for other occasions too, just so people can get out of the house.

* We could organise things that bring the kids into more direct contact with us and other kids. Parts of the BF Summer School work like this - but we could do things like one of the AS Neil groups, special week-ends with adults and kids doing things together.

* Another problem is that if you aren't fully involved with your Big Flame branch, you tend to lose touch with what's going on, and that way you lose the collective support that's available to people who are fully involved - even though you still believe in the same things.

Schools/teachers/children

8. I'm a teacher, and being the only socialist in my school, I find it very difficult to work in a socialist way. The kids expect a certain pattern of behaviour from you. There must be a tension for children brought up in a socialist way in a non-socialist world, with all the opposite pressures acting on the child. He or she might well choose the ideas of his or her friends, rather than the parents' ideas.

* I agree, because of the compromises the kids have to make - they often have to align with their friends. This is difficult for you as a parent, because it divides you from the children.

* My parents were socialists, and I found that the problem at school was the non-socialist teachers - the socialist teachers were easy to relate to. Growing up with socialist parents brings you close to them - they never pushed their politics on me, but when I saw what the world was like, I realised that their ideas were right.

* We don't use the power we have to influence what goes on in schools - we don't make the links between socialist teachers and socialist parents. There are lots of things we can do : legislation decrees that education should foster multi-racial and non-sexist ideas (Race Relations and Sex Discrimination Acts). So we parents have the right to inspect libraries, complain about what the children are being taught. And there are a number of progressive trends outside schools - the ITV programme "Our People", the youth workers' "Girls Projects", thenon-sexist books being produced. We should get onto governing bodies of schools and push these things.

- * Well, I was on a governing body for a year and it was pretty hard work - I'm not saying it isn't worth doing, and if I was a parent rep I'd have had a chance of sticking at it for a decent length of time, and maybe made more impression. But the thing that's worrying me is how deep sexist conditioning goes, and how little one can do as a parent, given the strength of the pressure from friends and school. My four year old daughter is obsessed with lipstick, pretty dresses and the like.
- * I think people make too much of make-up on girls. It's not necessarily so bad - there are plenty of feminists here wearing for instance.
- * But things are getting much better in schools. They're forming groups and having discussions at my sister's school which we wouldn't have dreamt of when I was there a few years ago.
- * We should assess the dissatisfaction that people outside school feel. My child is at an inner London Primary School, and she says she finds the lessons boring. When I went to discuss this with the staff, at first I couldn't get to speak to anyone, and then I was told that the school couldn't meet the needs of my child. But the truth is that the school can't meet the needs of any of the children.

Winding up comments

- * Guilt about how we are dealing with children is ever present. If we were to assume that the process is unconscious or not in our control, then when things don't go according to plan we don't feel guilty.
- * A few years ago I had a very good collective arrangement with other women for looking after the kids. We'll have to get this together again.
- * It's wrong to think of bringing up children in isolation of the rest of society. We should bring them up as people to cope with this world. It's not going to change too much, too quickly. About girls wearing lipstick : maybe you the father should wear it too (much applause and agreement).
- * We should pay more attention to the language we use. "Kid" is the word for a baby goat.
- * That comment about girls wearing lipstick : why is it that all the pressure is on girls to change - you don't see boys being sent out wearing frocks.

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