

WOMEN and BIG FLAME

I thought that the 2 Manchester contributions were very constructive and identified several of our problems as women in BF.

The 'History' sections accurately explained why we have no adequate theory to carry us through this period. The fact that the women's movement itself is at a low ebb, plus the general low state of any effective fightback in the working class also contribute to this state of affairs. A recent discussion on 'Women in Big Flame' in Coventry confirmed this view.

I agreed with most of the main points made in each section, especially the point about strengthening socialist-feminist politics so we can 'offer positive alternatives for women in this period, and thus attack Tory policies at the heart.' However, it's probably an over-simplification to say SWP and IMG have abandoned women's politics. They have obviously given less priority to work round women, but they still do it in specific ways eg in Women's Voice.

There are other statements and phrases that I'd like to question, though some of the unclarity may have come from the document being written in a hurry. It's not really accurate to say BF women played no significant role in feminist politics after 1976. Women from BF helped create the Health 'Fightback' organisation, several local socialist-feminist and NAC groups, and anti-imperialist women's groups. But it is true we didn't bring the discussion into Big Flame in an organised way and share the experiences and discuss our tactics and perspectives with other women in BF- we are often much too busy 'outside' BF.

I thought the two references to ideology around marriage etc were not developed enough to understand what the Manchester women meant. Again, we have to look at the material conditions the population as a whole finds itself in at this time to make a proper analysis of the effect (if any) the women's movement has had on these questions.

Under the title 'Big Flame women', I didn't understand the distinction made between political and physical unity unless it means the unity (between men and women?) attempted at Beyond the Fragments Conference was 'premature'?

The 'Manchester- an example'- section was a really positive suggestion- a good model to follow, with women meeting not as an 'extra' meeting, but as part of the existing structure of branch meetings, with the men finding something useful to do at the same time. South London women have started meeting on the same pattern. But I would like to know on what basis non-BF women are asked to these women's meetings locally. We have as BF women, often done this in the past- eg London Women's meetings, Women's Commissions, etc. But if we agree (and I think we do) that there is such a crisis in our organisation about women's politics, shouldn't we be discussing our internal politics alone for a while? Maybe the Manchester women intend their discussions to be outward going- and it is important to be in contact with other socialist-feminist women involved in struggles and developing theory where we live. But on what basis would non-BF women want to come to these meetings? Women are always too busy as it is!

In the past there have been problems of women coming to 'open' BF meetings, or Women's Commissions who don't really agree with our politics and do nothing to help us build them, or our organisation.

In the same way, I disagree that the women's Commissions should be open. It wasn't stressed either, as we feel strongly in Coventry, ~~that~~ the Women's commission should be delegate-centred, although if other women want to attend, they can, of course. And occasionally we should ask the Women's Commission to arrange half or whole day 'schools', educationals, etc on current important topics. Delegates over a reasonable period (a year if possible) ensure a continuity and development, and women can get to know each other and develop a style of work in this way. I do agree (strongly!) that minutes and introductions should be better prepared and reported (local womens meetings as well). This goes for all commissions. But I don't agree that Women's Commissions should be monthly- at most they should be six weeks apart- possibly longer apart!

I didn't understand the suggestion about women in the same areas of work getting together outside of the Women's Commission- unless the Mc women meant in an informal way. (But when ?-possibly in the lunch-hour of each other commission- eg Irish, Industrial, Education etc?) It is a good idea for the Women's Commission itself to concentrate on one subject only for a year - eg Sex and Class- but I think if women start trying to get together on a work/political area basis and go to the commissions and go to local BF women's meetings as well as their mixed local BF branch meetings and their local non-BF women's groups- obviously women will be leaving BF in droves!

RETURNING TO THE BASIC PROBLEM

All the above comments are given in the context of the general enthusiasm which greeted the Mc proposals at the Sep BF National women's Meeting. BUT ONLY 3 WOMEN TURNED UP TO THE NOVEMBER WOMEN'S COMMISSION! so obviously we are not solving any of these problems by coming up with new 'perspectives'. The rest of what I have to say relates to other structures/problems in BF- not just the Women's Commission- eg problems with people not standing for the NC, non-functioning or poorly attended commissions, how members relate to their branches, the uneven quantity of work and commitment throughout the organisation. I obviously can't go into all these areas here, but will concentrate on some points about the WC.

What is the Women's Commission's Function?

Maybe BF women are waiting for the Dec Conference to be over before starting on the new plan? I think it's also because there is a continuing confusion over the role of the WC., which it is essential to clear up- and soon. It's demoralising for the few women who do go, as it is often difficult for the few women on the NC, and all the other 'token' women scattered around the various commissions or work groups- (usually literally one or even none !)

Some ideas

1. We don't need the WC to act as a friendship/support group as it has done for women (nationally) in the past if BF in all the local branches can meet locally.

2. It's very expensive to go to commissions, apart from the time aspect. There should be more effort to co-ordinate commission meetings so that they are on the same day and members can travel together in cars.

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3. Discussions must be better prepared, otherwise there is no incentive for women to travel long distances.
4. The role the WC used to have as watch-women over the organisation is not needed in the same way- especially if women are organised in a stronger way locally, and presence, ^{at} or communication with women on the the NC is improved. Probably a lot of members would challenge this view! But I don't think it has had this role or power for some time, and you could (!) argue that blatant sexism is less rife in BF than before- although that's probably because most men at least give lip-service to anti-sexism. The WC should have some aspect of this power, but we need to work out how, etc.
5. Women need to get more powerful, by becoming more confident about our women's politics, and as BF members. We all need opportunities (eg at public speaking) and encouragement to develop. We are not getting this via the WC- not through any fault of the WC, but because collectively we have been unclear what its role is.
6. The WC over the last 2 years has done valuable work around NAC, and other issues, and some women have found it a positive experience.
7. It should take the bold step of transforming itself into an effective body which can co-ordinate the kind of study and practise outlined by the Manchester woemn. It needs all branches to send regular delegates to do this!
8. There remains the problem of whether women will come to it? And if they don't-
9. Does that mean women in BF don't want a women's commission? OR are women voting with their feet because of some of the reasons already outlined and because meetings can be boring and alienating- as strongly stated at this year's Summer School. There BF women said they would like more opportunities to get to know each other and spend time sorting out all these many questions in more relaxed surroundings, and with a less pressured time-scale?
10. I think the last part of point 9 should be acted on, and I hope several women will actually take the initiative to do something. Two women are already planning to organise a BF women's weekend away in Feb, or later, 1981. What other suggestions are there?

Finally (sorry this is so long)

I don't think women on the NC have done enough this year to help analyse these problems or put forward helpful suggestions as the situation gradually deteriorated. That's another of those structural (and political) problems)- we get too isolated on the NC.

I hope this year can be different. We do have a lot to contribute to socialist-feminist politics and we also need to build our power as women- again, and in a more permanent way in BF as a whole.

what I have written comes out of helpful discussions with Coventry women and IS in N.London in particular, but also from numerous other discussions with BF members. Hope we can discuss some of the ideas, (and I am sure other woemn have others) at the Conference.



In Sisterhood- Anne Dryden.

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