

History:

Up to 1976 BF made an important contribution to feminist politics. We developed our position on womens' autonomy and our relationship to the WLM. Because of our position BF was able to develop political perspectives learning directly from the WLM. Our main contribution to the movement was working with women in the community and showing how day to day struggles around housing, play areas etc. were as much a part of the struggle for womens' liberation as was NAC as consciousness raising groups.

Through this political work with women and using Struggle Notes, working class women with kids found our organisation accessible, quite a few joined and others worked consistently with us. After this time Big Flame as an organisation played no significant role in feminist politics. Individual comrades continued to develop feminist politics and brought this into the organisation in a fragmented way: a bit of NAC here; a bit of violence there, adding women on to the end of every sentence.

Women were still attracted to our organisation because of:

- 1) Our past history
- 2) Our position on autonomy which will hold true beyond socialism
- 3) Our style - we are nice, socialiable people and learnt from the WLM about structures and leadership. We even talk about sex in our paper

But women soon become frustrated by the lack of an overall socialist feminist perspective within the organisation and soon begin to wonder what the organisation has to offer them and why they are in a mixed organisation at all.

More History:

Between 1976 BF conference and 1978 BF conference we saw a decline in the power of women within BF, splits within the WLM widening and women being put more on the defensive as the state clawed back previous gains. This was debated in the BF Womens 1978 Conference Bulletin. A strategy which would have best suited our politics would have been the Womens Voice initiative towards working class women, if that had been an autonomous organisation. Unfortunately, our involvement was made impossible because it was founded as a sister organisation to the SWP with SWP politics. Manchester women argued that our strategy as an organisation should be to build the socialist feminist current and to push SF groups to develop its theory and practice together based firmly in the experiences of working class women. This was passed at conference but failed to take into account the nature of the SFC. Also priorities of BF women in different towns did not always coincide with Socialist Feminist groups.

Socialist-Feminist Current (SFC):

Up to now SF politics have not had significant impact on the WLM. But it is early days and a lot of important ideas are being developed.

Most of the SF groups which developed were discussion groups with some exceptions eg Liverpool Womens' Action Group. In the North they tended to be a forum for already active women to discuss what is a socialist feminist theory and practice related to racism, health, violence, welfare state etc.

Of course, there are a lot of active Socialist Feminists who do not define themselves as being part of the SFC. In the same way a lot of women fight for liberation without relating to the WLM.

### Sex and Class:

One thing has become clear, the need to look at class oppression and womens' oppression separately and give each equal importance. Socialist Feminists often find themselves in a contradictory position because although there are connections ie socialist feminists see the need to overthrow capitalism as necessary in the transformation of relationships between people and at the same time believe that this transformation is necessary to achieve socialism. Nevertheless socialism and feminism do not necessarily have the same aims and these connections need to be negotiated over and over. If we learn from our history, feminism is sold out or subordinated to socialist ideology in every movement despite involvement of women activists.

Socialist Feminists in defining themselves against Revolutionary and Radical Feminists have tended to bend the stick more towards a class analysis with feminism tagged on and failed to recognise the common ground eg over rape and violence. There are differences but it is as necessary to work together with other feminists as it is to work with men.

### Threatening:

Developing a new analysis of womens' oppression is threatening not only to men but also to many women. In BF we try to build an organisation which is accessible to everyone who wants positive changes in society. This includes married women with kids who live in a nuclear family. At the same time at the beginning of the WLM our main attack was on marriage and the nuclear family as being central to womens' oppression by men and by capitalism. This has not changed. What has changed is that often it is conveniently forgotten by socialist organisations and more recently by the WLM as more and more feminists take this road. Feminist politics need not be alienating but they do challenge stereotype relationships between men, women and kids and they do demand change by both women and men.

### Tory Policies:

Thatcherism isn't simply an attack on the rights of women. Old ideologies are being recreated and reinforced about the role of women and the nature of femininity as one of the ideological lynchpins for the restructuring of society. So now more than ever feminist politics need to be at the fore and not abandoned as a luxury as in the case of organisations such as SWP and ING.

### Big Flame:

The main contribution Big Flame can make to the socialist movement is to strengthen the need for socialist feminist politics to offer positive alternatives for women in this period and thus attack Tory policies at the heart. This will need a large offensive which includes feminists, trade unionists, community activists etc and BF can act as a focus for socialists who do not want to fight a defensive battle only but want to develop a coherent socialist feminist alternative.

This perspective by BF is the only way BF will keep women in the organisation because as women feel more pressured by Tory attacks they are not going to stay in an organisation which takes them away from their main struggle.

### Big Flame Women:

The perspective for BF women should be to develop our politics on Sex and Class in order to make BF a real alternative to other left groups, but more importantly to use our experience as feminists within a mixed organisation to make a positive contribution to the socialist feminist movement, which can begin to build a body of politics which brings together the wide variety of social forces and movements, in a time when we need political unity. (Not physical unity as was tried at Beyond the Fragments Conference). By developing our politics on patriarchy we will understand better what unity means ie how socialist politics need to be

adapted and in some cases thrown out of the window in order to guarantee to feminists that they will not be sold out.

Practicalities of BF women organising:

Questions we could raise:-

- \*do we make concessions to patriarchy in prioritising Trade Union support for "A Woman's Right to choose?"
- \*How is sexuality made central to socialist feminist politics?
- \*How do we as white socialist feminist relate to anti-imperialist struggles in other countries?
- \*Demands around wages and conditions at work are created by a male-dominated Trade Union movement - are they therefore patriarchal?
- \*An end to patriarchal structures... does this mean an end to marriage and the nuclear family?
- \*Can you have a socialist perspective on male violence?

Manchester - a local example:

Women's meetings are built into the pattern of Branch life ie the Branch holds internals, educationals, public meetings on Thursday nights; one thursday a month is a womens meeting when men sell papers or have a study group. Manchester women plan that their project over the next year is to systematically discuss sex and class. To get together a reading list and to draw in other women who are close to us to be involved in these discussion.

A national perspective:

The role of the Women's Commission should be to systematically set out the discussion on sex and class within the organisation over the next year or so. Each monthly meeting could discuss a particular topic, with an introduction to be put into the Discussion Bulletin and the minutes written up in the DB also, to keep a record of the debate. The discussion should be flexible to reflect local and national politics.

The meetings should be open, but a core of committed women should be present throughout to ensure continuity. The discussion needs to be fed back into the organisation so that isolated women and men can also learn from it - this could be done through local branch discussion, joint commission meetings, regular attendance on the NC etc.

Women involved in the same areas of work could get together outside the commission structure to exchange knowledge and ideas, to relieve the WC from sorting out all areas a womens politics.

The discussion could be orientated towards the production of a second BF Women's pamphlet - on Sex and Class.

(Excuses for the smash crash style, but we're tired and it's late). Se you all at the conference.

In Sisterhood - Ella Hutton, Annie Rose, Jo Quinn - Manchester BF 22/10/80

A PERSONAL CONTRIBUTION ON SOCIALIST FEMINISM AND BIG FLAME -

Joining BF was never the positive, worked out decision I felt (somehow) it should have been. I joined in complete confusion, feeling very inconfident and intimidated by the wonderful right-on revolutionaries. I joined because of the inability of the women's movement to recognise the division which exist between women because of class and race, and I thought I was a socialist and wanted to find out more about socialism. I also joined because of a strong feeling that feminism is important to the left and should be argued for as an integral, not additional, part of revolutionary theory and practice. However, I know that at the time, I felt apologetic for thinking this... I hope you know what I mean..... it's the feeling that feminism is only really on the fringes of the main political struggle,... it's lacking confidence in feminism as the equally liberating force it has to be alongside socialism... hardly surprising really, when you consider that that's precisely what we're made to feel so often by the white, male left. Of course, I was extremely cross with myself for feeling this, and bewildered that the apparant/<sup>solution</sup>at the time was to get involved with a mixed organisation. I was a bundle of contradictions - the central one being between organising as a feminist and organising as a socialist.

At the time, I thought I'd never get over that one, and now I realise, (having failed to), that it's that very contradiction which is central to our political theory and practice as socialist feminists - it's the tightrope we need to walk in order to argue positively for socialist feminism within the women's movement and the left. As far as BF is concerned, being positive about socialist feminism enables us to look at the political problems which cause the divisions and tension which we often seek organisational solutions to.

For example a sister who was practically bludgeoned into standing for the NC last year when very few women were prepared to do so, felt sold out by the women in the organisation who didn't give her the support she needed once she was elected.

However, we shouldn't feel we need to don sackcloth and ashes to compensate for our political weakness, or to scurry around trying to find more women to stand, more women to come to the Women's Commission, etc and then blame ourselves (typical!) when the head count is wrong. There are very good reasons why we're weak at the moment - the Women's Movement is weak; we're reeling from the attacks which have rained down on us over the past few years... As a result, there is, I think, a crisis of ideas and political practice within the Women's Movement and amongst socialist feminists in particular because the nasties are out to exploit to the full every division which exists between us all, and our theory and practice isn't developed enough to cope. We need to understand those division, understand the nature of the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism and accept that conflict (big rows) may be a necessary part of gaining that understanding. I feel this is important from talking to BF women in Manchester, women I work with locally who want to talk more around this, and because I can see the lack of socialist feminist theory around me, and the poverty (often) of what little there is.

In BF, I think we've come a long way in developing socialist feminist theory and practice and have a lot to offer in stimulating discussion - which is why we're compiling this document - which we hope will encourage women to tackle these problems and share experience and ideas with each other and with socialist feminists close to BF. I'm aware that I'm repeating what I've heard many women say many times and I often wonder in black moments if in talking about talking about things, we're filling in time because we've nothing else to talk about doing (let alone do). Still if other women are as much as this, then we may just we well have a collective head bang as individual ones... Hmmm?

In much sisterhood - Ella Hutton, Manchester 20.10.80