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These notes are an attempt to explain my reservations about the political line the Tendency will be arguing for BF to adopt at the Conference, as I understand it from the various documents and motions it has produced so far, and why I will be voting against its main motion. However, I do think that the members of the Tendency have to be taken seriously for the effort they have put into thinking about the problems socialists face in Britain today and for making the attempt to formulate proposals about what should be done. Also, in bringing out the differences I do not want to imply that there is not considerable common ground between their positions and my own (in so far as the various confused, tentative thoughts I have about what we should be doing deserves to be called a position).

The most common response I have heard people make to the Tendency documents is that after reading them they are no clearer about what adopting these positions would mean in practice. Such a criticism can be easily overemphasised. The Tendency have readily admitted that their perspective is one in the process of development and it is far from easy at the moment for anyone to produce detailed proposals about what the left should be doing. In fairness, it has to be acknowledged that the document and motion from Banks and other members from North London BF was similarly thin when it comes to specific proposals for practice. In our defence (and it is far from a completely adequate one) is the fact that we were not claiming to have any major change of orientation for BF, but were trying to consolidate together what is the basis of BF's politics at present with added emphasis on certain things which BF claims to take seriously at present when in practice it doesn't (e.g. combining a feminist with a socialist perspective, having collective priorities). McKenzie has written that the Tendency is not claiming to be saying anything "startling profound" (Reply to Finn MacCool *Conference Bulletin no 1* p3). However, the Tendency has described existing BF positions as "stale, unimaginative...negative...conservative" (*Discussion Bulletin July* pp9-10). This surely implies at the very least that they are suggesting a significant change with the present practice. In which case they do have a duty to be much clearer about what it is they are proposing.

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The comments I want to make about the Tendency's positions cover three areas (a) the relationship with the autonomous movements, (b) socialist alternatives and (c) relationship with reformism. At the first Pre-Conference aggregate in London someone asserted that the Tendency's motion lacked a feminist perspective. In reply the Tendency members present stated that the motion included support for the struggles of women, black people and gays and also stressed the importance of struggles in the public services and the community (*Conference Bulletin no 2* see the last five lines of p1 and five lines near the top of p2). If having a feminist perspective is to mean anything it has to run through the whole document rather than be confined to ten lines and consist of something more than a ritualistic citing of the litany of women, black people and gays (by saying this I am not suggesting that doing this is at all easy when men are involved as authors and the Banks and others document can by any means be absolved from the same faults). I was also concerned to see that the motion preferred to use the description "independent" movements rather than "autonomous" ones and include youth and the unemployed in the list with no indication that there might be major differences in the basis on which these different movements claim their "independence". In addition there were no other references to the women's movement in the motion or the accompanying document except for the hope that BF might act as "a pole of attraction" for independent feminists- i.e. that we will be able to recruit them (*Conference Bulletin no 2* Motion p3 and Document p10).

The Tendency document on Revolutionary Organisation included women, black people and gays in another list. This time along with workplace struggles as struggles which are "limited" or "sectional" and which by themselves do not include an all-sided understanding and are unlikely to lead to an understanding of the need to overthrow the system as a whole. They are contrasted with the work of "revolutionaries" who can possess this all-sided understanding and unite all the different struggles. (*Conference Bulletin no 1* pp1-2). It would be difficult to find a clearer statement of the classical Marxist view that feminism is secondary and less important than socialism. Turning to another Tendency document- the political basis on which it was formed- we find another interesting statement: "A revolutionary organisation must have the capacity to independently intervene with its own particular political line in any movement, campaign or struggle, whilst seeking to learn the maximum amount from such situations in the process (*Discussion Bulletin July* p14). This statement requires a great deal more clarification. Are there any debates in the women's movement that BF would not think it appropriate to intervene with its "political line"? How would these lines be formulated- by the National Committee, by the women in the organisation or by some combination of the two? These questions have to be clarified if we are to assess the expressed desire to rebuild BF's "interventionist capacity".

#### Socialist Alternatives

On the question of Alternative Plans my position is not one of opposition but of more cautious support. The Tendency seems to have deliberately exaggerated the differences in the organisation on this question. There is no one who I have spoken to in BF who dismisses them. To hear some of the statements made by Tendency members you would get the impression what it was a new idea that only they had thought of. Socialist alternatives have a long history in the women's movement and can be found everywhere from In and Against the State to a long series of articles in Marxism Today over the last two years. The problem everyone is finding is moving from the idea and the invocation of Lucas Aerospace to more practical examples. There is a real tendency in the Tendency's documents to, in Chris Marshall's phrase, present socialist alternatives as "the recipe to solve every problem". Even after his amendment (which like the others goes somewhat towards improving the motion) while "defensive" struggles are now acknowledged as still important the process of achieving unity between different struggles is still equated with alternative plans. (with reference to what I said above it is interesting to see that the struggles of women, etc appear under the heading of "defensive" struggles).

The motion on New Technology proposes that there should be plans for alternative products in "every industry" (*Conference Bulletin no 2* p3). Thus such plans are presented as applicable in all situations and the question why Lucas is the only successful example anyone ever seems to point to is avoided. Although Bill Campbell in his latest document does acknowledge the existence of some of the problems (*Conference Bulletin no 3*), elsewhere other Tendency members have paid them no attention at all. For McKenzie the distinction between reformist Workers' Plans and "Counter Planning from Below" is so obvious that he very quickly dismisses the question of differentiating between them as a serious problem (*Conference Bulletin no 1* p3). In a recent document the Tendency describes its position thus: "The Tendency does not argue socialist alternatives in abstract, but in the context of a revolutionary intervention in class struggle" (*Conference Bulletin no 2* p2). The problem is that despite this statement is that all the advocacy of socialist alternatives has been in an abstract, programmatic way and not in terms of specific interventions in this or that particular struggle. The one move in a direction of concretising their argument by the Tendency- their work on New Technology- has also failed to move beyond the abstract level.

Reformism

As with socialist alternatives the Tendency sometimes gives the impression that it believes it was the first to think about the relationship between revolutionaries and reformism. In one document the Tendency criticises the left for its lack of a political orientation to reformism (*Conference Bulletin no 2 p5*). If by an orientation it is meant an opinion on the nature of reformism and propoganda aimed at reformists, then just about every left group has one. Trotskyism in particular makes it a key focus. You only have to look at page after page devoted to the Labour party in, say, Socialist Challenge or Newsline. The crucial question, of course, is just how adequate the various orientations have been. I have considerable difficulty in saying too much about the Tendency's orientation because repeated reading of its various documents still leaves me to a large extent uncertain just exactly what it is. There are innumerable statements to the effect that reformism is very important and we can't ignore it, but very little that goes much further. Some people have criticised the Tendency for devoting too much attention to the question of reformism. I disagree and believe they have raised an important question, so it is worth trying to unravel the theory of reformism behind the Tendency documents.

The Tendency's theory seems to me to veer between two different approaches to reformism: one which identifies it in terms of particular ideas and another which focuses on a group of particular institutions. Taking the former approach first we find reformism defined in one Tendency document as "a strategy which seeks to transform and modify the system from within" (*Conference Bulletin no 2 pII*). Bill Campbell says something similar: "a progressive desire to ameliorate the present situation and move towards socialism" (*Conference Bulletin no 3 pI*), as did the Theses on reformism proposed at last year's Conference: the belief that "socialism can be achieved without destroying the capitalist state". This distinction between reformists and revolutionaries in terms of a belief in whether or not you believe the state has to be smashed to achieve socialism doesn't seem to me very useful when the practice of both in the present period is not to attempt to destroy the state but to modify it in various ways (demands such as Troops Out or Free Abortion on Demand are modifications of the existing of the existing state). One way the Theses on Reformism where an improvement on traditional (e.g. Trotskyist) approaches to reformism is that they stated that reformist ideas are not imposed on the working class by the reformist leaders, but are reproduced in everyday life. However, this insight has never been taken any further in the Tendency's work on reformism. Neither has there been any attempt to analyse the material basis for reformism e.g. in divisions in the working class. At other times in Tendency documents reformism is identified, not in terms of ideas, but in terms of particular institutions, usually the Labour party and the leadership structures of the trade union movement. This also seems to me inadequate as reformism is something which is encountered everywhere including tenant's associations, community groups and self-proclaimed revolutionary organisations. In both its forms the understanding of reformism used by the Tendency is highly abstract. It is not empirical and historical, taking account of its specific British character and the various changes it has undergone in the post war period.

To say all this is not to imply that producing an adequate understanding of reformism is an easy task. No-one else has done it yet so the Tendency can't be condemned on this score. My point is that the initial premises from which it has begun to develop its understanding are not, in my opinion, the ones which will help produce an adequate understanding. I believe the way it is best to define reformism is as a set of practices- rather than ideas or institutions. That is a certain way of doing political work; some aspects of which have already been identified in previous BF publications like the Draft Manifesto e.g. sectionalism and delegation, and to which others could be added e.g. pragmatic compromise. Instead of being reducible to one key idea such as a belief in the neutrality of the state, reformism is a dynamic contradiction.

There are aspects of it which clearly demarcate labour and capital as having different interests and other aspects which confine the conflict between them within certain narrow limits. The definition of reformism I have proposed is clearly one which extends much wider than the Labour party and the trade unions, and crops up everywhere throughout capitalist society.

I have been rightly criticised by McKenzie for describing the Tendency's analysis of reformism as a more sophisticated version of the classical Trotskyist one, without providing any evidence to back up this claim (*Conference Bulletin no 1* p3). I accept that there are considerable dangers in attaching labels to people's positions when the result is more of an insult than a source of enlightenment. At the same time I do believe, as I hope will be clearer by now, that there is a considerable overlap (although not a total one) between the Tendency's understanding of reformism and that in the Trotskyist tradition. Some of the characteristics of Trotskyism (as outlined in the BF pamphlet by Lewis and Thompson) are a) working from general principles rather than the general situation, b) emphasis on the problem facing the socialist movement as a crisis of ideas and seeing the way to raise consciousness as a battle of ideas, particularly with reformist ideas, and c) the way to win people to socialism is through such debates to expose reformist leaders in the eyes of their supporters. Thus we find in the Tendency motion the statement that our aim is to accentuate "the limited and contradictory nature of reformist politics in the eyes of important sections of the working class" (*Conference Bulletin no 2* p3). The reason why Trotskyists work in broad front work is precisely to expose reformists and win recruits from reformist organisations on that basis. I would hope that BF member's main reason for involvement in particular struggles or campaigns is to further their development and build working class or women's power in that area rather than to recruit people away from reformism.

There also remains the question of how we should relate to those institutions especially associated with reformism. The original political basis for the Tendency contained a formulation which seemed fairly uncontroversial—such institutions can not be bypassed and counterposed to a pure autonomous working class struggle. We should work in unions and Trades Councils fighting for independent working class action within them and raising our own demands. (*Discussion Bulletin July* p14). However, more recent formulations present the relationship somewhat differently: "Put in a nutshell our perspective should be locating counter-planning from below inside the varied forms of the AES at local and national level" (Document *Conference Bulletin no 2* p8, see also the Motion p2 for a similar statement). My worry about this position is that it makes developments inside institutions like the Labour party the foci of our interventions. We may be opposing certain reactionary elements of the AES or adding more socialist ones (as is suggested *ibid* p9), but we are basically accepting the terrain on which supporters of the AES have chosen to fight which will of necessity rule out of the debate some of the questions we would want to introduce. I reject the Tendency's suggestion that support for alternative plans like that of Lucas should also imply support for alternative economic strategies at a national level because we have to be able to offer a clear alternative to monetarism (*Discussion Bulletin July* p9). There is a very big difference between plans formulated inside a company which are used as part of the day to day struggle over the way things are organised at present, and us preparing from outside some plan for the national which it will be up to other people (e.g. those in the Labour party) to attempt to enforce on the government. In such circumstances where we lack any power to determine what will happen and will not be able to use the plan to achieve concrete short-term gains, then the whole thing becomes a meaningless propaganda exercise. It is fair enough in our attacks on Tory and Labour monetarism to give some general principles about how a socialist economy might operate, but it shouldn't be our task to work out detailed plans.

Something else which is unclear is just how the Tendency's proposed new understanding of reformism would alter BF's present practice. Most people in BF are grateful enough in their struggles to have reformists to work alongside and do not restrict themselves to only dealing with pure revolutionaries. Many people in BF, most particularly those involved with the Industrial Commission are standing for shop stewards or Trades Councils. Few people would accept the Tendency's implicit division between working in a mass way with those participating in a particular struggle and working through the union structure. Most attempt to do both. The perspective argued by the Tendency does not appear to be rooted in any practice- either a developed critique of the mass politics practice or a proposed new form of practice. When the Tendency criticise what they see as the traditional BF approach it is usually for their lack of commitment to national organisation or the lack of any long term strategic thinking, and not any specific criticisms about practice.

The Tendency Document and Motion argue that the crisis faced by socialists in Britain today is about more than problems of leadership and organisation but is a crisis of politics stemming from the inadequacy of "defensive and economic perspectives" (*Conference Bulletin no 2* Motion pI, see also Document pI). I do believe that working out political positions is important and BF does need to do a lot of rethinking. At the same time I do believe that (even after Chris Marshall's amendment) the Tendency's position does blame everything on the left's perspectives without taking account of the context. There are many other factors which explain why the working class is currently divided and demoralised. By appearing to reduce the problem to a "crisis of politics" it makes solutions seem a lot simpler than they actually are. What BF needs at the present moment is a much more realistic assessment of the options open to us. We also need to examine much more carefully our past experience and what lessons should be learnt from it. It is too easy to write off BF's history and some populist aberration, and suggest we have to come up with a completely new set of political positions.