

STATEMENT ON THE POLITICAL BASIS FOR THE FORMATION  
OF A TENDENCY IN BIG FLAME

Following the publication of a previous draft statement and the ensuing discussion, we are submitting the following statement as the basis for the formation of a Tendency.

THE REASONS FOR A TENDENCY: BF ORGANISATION AND POLITICS

We do not see the formation of tendency as an abnormal event. Within any organisation there will be differences of opinion, within some common political basis of membership. A Tendency exists to argue for specific political perspectives on particular aspects of the policies of the organisation. It is not an alternative leadership, nor do we seek to put forward perspectives in every area. Later we will distinguish those areas where we think we have a distinctive contribution to make. There are many problems facing BF which we do not claim any distinctive position. The areas we will try and develop are mainly connected to socialist alternatives, strategy to reformism and the question of political organisation.

We would like to stress that we are a Tendency inside Big Flame. Aside from the areas of common ground, we believe that there is the space in BF to develop the kind of political perspectives needed on the Left and inside the working class movement. Nevertheless, it is the situation inside BF which inevitably was the main impetus towards the formation of the Tendency. Conference and subsequent events have confirmed a number of trends that we consider politically unhealthy.

The Conference indicated an impasse in the development of our political perspectives. Many of the motions were stale, unimaginative and worse - negative and trying to avoid key problems. This was particularly the case with respect to motions presented on socialist alternatives, unemployment and general political perspectives. To take one example. The successful motion limiting our support for socialist alternatives contained (in point 8) a rejection of alternative economic strategies from the Left. We believe this to be a wrong position, particularly in the context of having to offer a clear alternative to monetarism. But what is more important, this was presented and passed with absolutely no detailed justification and argument, either verbally or in written form in the pre-Conference period. On top of these areas, other controversial issues, such as reformism, were consigned to the furthest possible date. The Reformism Theses, which were one of the first published documents, got only one reply. Commission motions tended to re-iterate existing positions and those dealing with work in campaigns and movements tended to be self-congratulatory, or failed to outline the basis for independent political intervention as BF; for instance within the womens' movement and struggles.

We consider this to be a crisis of politics rather than one of organisational forms. Much of BF theory, perspectives and tactics were developed in a period of relative expansion of capitalism; in periods when the working class were on the offensive alongside other movements. We have simply not adjusted to a period of prolonged crisis and recession, downturns in struggle and the necessity for new demands, perspectives and organisation.

Despite our reputation for 're-thinking' there has been precious little going on. In fact our politics have become conservative in many spheres. Unable to go forward, we are tending to go backwards, reviving old debates without learning the lessons of past ones. This was the case with the recent Day School on Party, Class & Movements. Obviously an organisation must continually debate and renew its conceptions of theory and perspectives in areas like this. But the debate at the day school did not advance on many of the debates earlier this decade. It is not a question of it being unnecessary to debate questions of intervention, the party and so on. But unless an organisation consolidates its ideas, so that there is a basis from which the debate is renewed, it will be condemned to re-cycling old questions, paralysed in its ability to act collectively. This is particularly the case in relation to new members. In those few areas where we are recruiting, many of the new members haven't been through some of the 'old' debates and are influenced by ideas which are unclear on the role of a general political organisation. The organisation is failing to give new members a political direction at the level of ideas or practice. This re-inforces a situation that one comrade described as Big Flame being an 'easy organisation to be in.' It functions too often as an 'umbrella' group of activists loosely bound together, rather than as an interventionist organisation with an independent practice and political line. The lack of collective practice and real priorities has become the most crucial weakness, not just of new groups, but for many of the older ones as well. These problems can only be solved politically by a renewal of theoretical debate and political strategy, which would inform a collective practice helping to ensure our survival and growth as a current on the British Left.

#### THE POLITICAL CRISIS IN THE WORKING CLASS MOVEMENT

Of course such a renewal of politics cannot be separated from the problems facing the Left and working class movement in Britain and internationally. The crisis of the revolutionary left, often manifested by splits and divisions in all political currents, reflects the tremendous changes undergone in the political situation, economic developments and level of class struggle on an international scale. We cannot possibly deal with these events here. But two factors need emphasis. First, there has been a decline in the degree to which events in particular countries like Vietnam and China have acted as an inspiration to socialists everywhere. International events have had more dispiriting effects, Cambodia being a particularly harsh example (though others, for instance Nicaragua, offer different prospects). This has fed a deeper questioning of the meaning and viability of socialism. Second, the economic crises affecting the capitalist world have generally not had the radicalising effects on class struggle that the bulk of the Left both hoped for and expected. Instead that struggle has been on the retreat, disciplined by defeats and the levels of unemployment etc. There has almost been an inverse development of the political strength of the ruling classes of capitalist countries, as the economic crises have deepened and working class movements have failed to advance the level of struggle. Many of the events which have led to a more difficult situation have been beyond the control and influence of particularly the revolutionary Left. But they have led to a

crisis of political perspectives within which our political debates have to be situated. The British Left is no exception in being at something of a watershed in terms of political strategy after a series of setbacks and the return of a right-wing Tory government. One reflection of the political upheaval is that quite a number of socialists are thinking about joining the Labour Party seriously as a political option for the first time for many years. It is no co-incidence that we have had a 'debate of the decade' both in terms of its timeliness and the fact that the left-reformists felt strong enough to call it. For years many on the Far Left have consoled themselves that limits in political impact were due to size or sectarianism. We are now having to re-consider how much is related to our own strategies and perspectives. Now we are in a prolonged recession, the question of strategy comes particularly to the fore. It is no longer enough for socialists to be 'militants' - to be against things like wage controls and cuts. To make an impact in the working class we have to be able to put forward positive alternatives; alternatives that cannot be confined to propaganda about a distant and wonderful socialist future.

There are no magic solutions that are going to create such a strategy and alternatives overnight. We are not going to be able to quickly roll back a tide that is normally not within our control. But we have to start working towards finding solutions. Central to this must be the development of an effective transitional politics. That is, a strategy which bridges the gap between the existing struggles and the fight for a socialist society. This recognises the likelihood that socialism is not an immediate or even medium-term possibility in Britain and probably other advanced capitalist countries. In this context, reformism, a strategy which seeks to transform and modify the system from within, is bound to gain in credibility: as the forces round Benn are now doing. The revolutionary struggle for reforms is distinguished in content by challenging the basis of capitalist power and in form by being based on the independent mobilisation of the working class as a self-active force. The task facing us today is to re-consider what kind of demands and forms of organisation can challenge that power; alongside a realistic consideration of how the hold of reformism can be broken given the balance of forces, with revolutionary socialists still a very small current.

Existing transitional politics solves none of these problems. Based on the orthodox Trotskyism of the method embodied in the 1938 Programme it has failed to re-adjust to a situation where the epoch is not one of imminent revolution. Hence much of what is 'transitional' in fact pre-supposes that dual power is round-the-corner; for instance in the demand for a 'workers government.' Such demands manage not only to fail to relate to existing struggles, but often re-inforce illusions in the traditional working class institutions. Allied to a continuing adherence to catastrophist economics, where the final crisis of capitalism is about to appear, transitional politics de-generates into the kind of embarrassing and ineffective 'exposure tactics' that are all-too common.

In the absence of a transitional strategy, only a restricted number of Left strategies carry any weight inside the working

class movement: the 'alternative strategy' of the Labour Left, the militant economism identified most closely with the SWP and a 'movement' option which denies the need for a general organisation and has been boosted by an interpretation of "Beyond the Fragments" independent of the authors' intentions. All have their strong points. The Labour Left's project of democratising the Labour Party and developing an economic strategy which can be implemented under a left-moving Labour Government, has a certain realism and aspects of the programme (state intervention, import controls, increased public spending etc) touch on vital issues in the working class. The SWP's declared policy of only dealing with the effects of the capitalist crisis (arguing that to pose solutions to causes short of socialism will lead to reformism), at least allows them to become the leading resistance force inside those issues and struggles they consider most important - mainly industrial, but also campaigns like the ANL and the anti-nuclear movement. The Movement orientation is building on both a generalised rejection of aspects of the organised Left groups and on the strength of the ever-increasing variety of local struggles and campaigns.

Big Flame cannot survive without posing an alternative to such perspectives. This is a tremendous task. We have to build from the most obvious weaknesses. The Labour Left remains wedded to constitutional and parliamentary methods. While it seeks to mobilise the working class, not only is the political basis of that mobilisation inadequate; the working class is not seen as an independent political force. The Alternative Economic Strategy is the perfect case in point. It is a programme to be implemented by the next Labour Government (forever the next..), with the role of the working class at best a passive stage army. Inevitably, therefore it underestimates the power of the Labour right and the ruling class to incorporate and smash measures such as planning agreements. The main problem with the SWP-type strategy is that even accounting for its narrowness, it poses no way of taking people beyond militant defensive struggles. In consequence the problem of building a socialist consciousness and movement inside the working class over a long time span is reduced to individual workers joining the SWP. The refusal of general political organisation is part of a growth of 'a-partyist' trends internationally, which combine agnosticism or hostility to the party in varying degrees. Work in local campaigns, in autonomous movements and linked only through ad-hoc alliances is counterposed to the need for a general organisation. Such an orientation is more than a refusal of general organisation; of necessity it is also a refusal of strategy itself, of a programmatic intervention inside class struggles. By postponing programme, strategy and Organisation into a distant future or denying them altogether, they therefore leave other political strategies unchallenged (including the previously-mentioned Labour Left and SWP). Class struggle cannot be advanced solely through a combination of local or sectoral initiatives. An implicit division of labour is established where the national organisations deal with general strategy - the 'big issues', while local groupings deal with specific initiatives on a day-to-day level. This is totally inadequate for breaking the hold of reformism and in fact contains an inevitable accommodation to reformist forces to keep local alliances together on their 'minimum agreement' basis.

Such issues by no means exhaust weaknesses of Left strategies. For instance there is still great inconsistency on solidarity work on international questions. But the previously mentioned areas are those where we feel the Tendency has a potential contribution to make.

### BIG FLAME AND TRANSITIONAL POLITICS

In terms of an ability to move towards a transitional strategy Big Flame stands in an ambiguous position. In some of our activity there are examples of moves in such a direction. The 'Fightback' campaign is an example of an initiative that goes beyond traditional trade unionism; facing the question of what kind of health service we need and yet at the same time using this forward movement to strengthen the basic defensive fight against the cuts. On a theoretical level we have published (for instance in 'Revolutionary Socialism' No. ) articles on 'socialist alternatives' But every article was about personal life, or in one case the service sector (health). Without for one moment denying the relevance of such articles, if 'pre-figurative' politics is confined to those spheres it leaves untouched what remains the central area, of industrial struggle. It is here that Big Flame (as shown in the successful Conference motion on 'socialist alternatives') is hesitant or negative about things like workers plans, except in propaganda terms.

To understand the ambiguity of BF on these questions we have to examine the theoretical tradition, not only in relation to ourselves but to our current in other countries. This is one thing the Tendency will be trying to do as part of a re-evaluation of our political perspectives. We do not claim in advance to know or predict the extent of division there is, or will be, in the organisation on these areas. But we do think the formation of a Tendency is a healthy and useful thing in this respect. Given that many of our own questions and answers are half-formed, the clarification the Tendency seeks for itself can only help the general debate in BF. Given the importance of the issues, accelerated by the challenge of factors like new technology, it is vital for the credibility of revolutionary politics that an attempt to explore the possibilities of a transitional strategy is made.

### THE DEFINING POLITICAL BASIS OF THE TENDENCY

Although we have been primarily talking in terms of transitional politics, our approach goes wider to look at some of the implications and parallel issues. We would see the political basis for the Tendency as being summarised in the following way:

1. For a transitional perspective: We wish to see developed perspectives that will link short term demands to the long-term struggle for socialism by fighting for reforms which call into question capitalist power and ideology, developing forms of independent working class organisation in the process. Within this approach, we are in favour of the development of workers plans in each industry, both as means of defence against unemployment and as a general means of working class counter-planning from below with reference to issues like new technology. This will necessitate a struggle to implement such plans on workers' terms that recognises the long-term nature of a struggle with-in, and against, capitalism. We are in principle in favour of raising alternative economic strategies and wish to investigate these possibilities, including those at the regional and local

level. However this would in no way compromise our opposition to the Labour left and CP's 'Alternative Economic Strategy' and in particular to their chauvinism. Our approach inevitably extends itself to confront the international dimension of the economic and social division of labour that flows from the capitalist mode of production. A transitional strategy should also encompass demands relating to democracy and accountability that have developed as a thread running through many struggles from the public sector to control of the police.

2. For a revolutionary strategy on reformism: Given the existing balance of forces and recognising our own marginality on the revolutionary left, transitional perspectives of necessity mean raising the question of relating to reformist institutions like Labour Governments and Councils and programmes like the Alternative Economic Strategy. They cannot be by-passed by counterposing a pure, autonomous working class struggle. This does not mean acting as a pressure group on Labour, but of fighting for independent working class action (in unions, Trades Councils, community organisations etc) which may have to fight to impose its demands on such bodies as Councils. We are in favour of a vote for Labour on the basis of its relations with the working class (as in our existing policy in BF), moves to democratise the Labour Party and the possibilities of a Left Labour Government. This will help shift the balance of class forces and draw greater numbers of working class people into struggle; aiding the overall development of the class struggle as long as independent forms of action, politics and organisation are also built. These alternatives and effective transitional politics will be unlikely to arise within the Labour Party and this stands as the main case against entry.

3. For the central role of Revolutionary Organisation: The last two decades have seen the growth of autonomous movements like the womens movement and on a different level independent campaigns like those against nuclear power. Such movements and campaigns have to be recognised as having a key role to play in motivating opposition to capitalism and in defining the nature of socialism. We completely support and wish to strengthen the traditional position of BF in relation to the organisational and political autonomy of the womens and other movements. Any transitional perspectives have to recognise the increased weight that such movements have as basis for organising and in the effect they have in transforming the general body of socialist politics. For instance in helping to unite questions of community needs, family life and the workplace. We also support the need for broad campaigns and rank and file organisation independent of particular parties. In this sense we agree with the general orientation of the 'class before party' position. But we reject the view that the growth of autonomous organisation and independent campaigns lessens the need for interventionist general political organisation. The growing complexity of social forces only heightens the strategical and practical role of Revolutionary Organisation, now and in the longer term struggle for power. 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. The Tendency seeks to re-build this interventionist capacity in BF which has gradually been lost in many spheres and resulted in rapid decline in collective practice and therefore organisational direction and cohesion. We are against any tendency towards federalism and want to see strong local and Commission work being guided by an effective system of national priorities, aided by the national newspaper.

We want to see the strengthening of Big Flame as an effective, independent national organisation, with clear strategic orientation, acting as a political reference point and capable of directly aiding different struggles.

### THE ORGANISATION OF THE TENDENCY

Within Big Flame, political discussion is hampered by a tradition of trying to achieve consensus at the expense of clarity and the expression of differences which are implicitly seen as harmful. This tends to be stultifying, ineffective and undemocratic. Differences do exist, but they are all too often shoved under the carpet and left to emerge in the form of personal niggles and gossip. We believe that differences should be expressed and discussed more freely. A Tendency helps the process of discussion and internal democracy.

The Tendency will not organise as a faction with its own discipline and so on. It will be a loose body, that will organise meetings on local, regional and national lines to discuss and develop our perspectives in the context of the debate in BF and the Left generally. Anyone who supports the political basis of the Tendency and wishes to receive documents and attend meetings (which will be advertised through normal BF channels) should contact the Convener - Goodman of Manchester BF.

TENDENCY ONE  
JUNE 1980.

### Tendency Supporters

The following people support the tendency on the political basis given here. Because of problems of deadlines and with the circulation of this statement some BF members involved in tendency discussions have not yet had time to say whether they support the statement. However we felt it best that the statement be published now rather than delaying it another month or more.

Bruce (Preston)  
Bill Campbell (S. London)  
John Charles (Liverpool)  
John Fantham (S. London)  
Ian French (Liverpool)  
Laurie Goodman (Manchester)  
Jim Hart (Liverpool)  
Robert Koch (Birmingham)  
Richard Mark (Manchester)  
Chris Marshall (Norwich)  
Ian Mc'Kenzie (Liverpool)  
Ben Roberts (Birmingham)  
Annie Rose (Manchester)