

## Big Flame contribution to the ISA post-conference bulletin

The vicious attacks of the Tory govt. on the working class are demanding a united fight back. Such a fightback must involve wide layers throughout the labour movement as well as the revolutionary left. Such a fightback is emerging and in many areas militants in the Labour Party, CP, far left groups and independents are uniting around limited but essential courses of action. Big Flame's policy is to work as strongly as possible in initiatives which unite the widest number of militants around specific demands and perspectives. There is little doubt that the greatest measure of unity on the far left is of the utmost importance to the ability of revolutionaries to aid that process. The ISA was established in 1977 to do just that and naturally this provided the focus for the debate at the conference. In this contribution I shall try to clarify our views on the question of unity on the far left and answer some of the questions raised at the conference.

### Big Flame and the IMG - is Big Flame sectarian?

The characterisation that BF has taken a sectarian turn was made by the IMG in their paper to the conference. 'Sectarian' is a word indiscriminately used amongst the left and nearly always without definition. A working definition might be "clearly putting, in one's practice, the interests of the organisation above that of the class". It will be seen from this or any other conceivable definition that use of the word 'sectarian' involves political judgement by the user. Also an idea in one's head may be diabolically 'sectarian' but no one would notice the idea unless it had some effect in real life, in practice in the class struggle. And I say "clearly putting the interests of the organisation first" to draw attention to the fact that most revolutionary organisations presumably believe they are furthering the interests of the class. I think if 'sectarian' is going to be used then it would best be reserved for characterising organisations such as the WRP, RCG, RCT who 'clearly' according to the criteria of those of us on the 'living left' do put their organisation first again and again and conduct their politics in a manner generally detrimental to the struggle whatever it is. Because the IMG's contribution to the conference accused BF of being sectarian (indeed the whole weight of their argument about fusion and the IMG's openness seems to largely rest on this charge sticking) and the fact that (was echoed as a central feature against BF in the conference, it is necessary to give some background for our rejecting the charge. As far as I can recall we have never as an organisation been accused of sectarianism at a national level (and only once, to my knowledge, with some justification, at a local level). Our record in helping maintain united front activity, through thick and thin, can, I think, be easily corroborated on the ground. Nor am I aware of any occasion when we have withdrawn from united activity, including over the past year or so when we are meant to have taken a sectarian turn. The charge relates solely to our refusal to have fusion talks with the IMG. Since this is the crux of the issue it is necessary to give an account of our relations with the IMG over the past 2½ years.

It was in early 1977 that BF 'discovered' the IMG, after several years when they, like the SWP had been seen as much as an adversary as an ally. At best there was an uneasy relationship in various alliances. BF had adopted a position at its October 1976 conference of support for a united far left intervention in elections. We had been influenced by experience in Europe eg the Democrazia Proletaria campaign in Italy in which the groups we related to were involved. In early 1977 there was the Stechford by-election and our Birmingham comrades asked for a discussion on whether we should support the SWP or IMG. Tariq Ali was saying that the IMG would be in favour of dropping out in favour of a 'class struggle' candidate. SWP refused such a position and BF clearly supported the IMG stance and proceeded to work in the campaign. There followed the IMG campaign in the May 1977 GLC elections when BF members worked for IMG candidates. In both these campaigns we were the only political organisation to respond positively to the IMG initiative. The IMG, more used to the sectarian infighting of the rest of the trotskyist

left, were pleasantly surprised by the positive support we gave them and the fact that we did not make a whole series of preconditions for our support. Thus the IMG "discovered" Big Flame. After this, national discussions took place, for the first time ever, between IMG and BF and the Socialist Unity campaign was formed. At the founding conference of Socialist Unity, in November 1977, BF argued that SU be seen as a testing ground, in practice, to see whether a new revolutionary organisation, uniting BF, IMG, ISA and independents, could be formed. It was our position that for electoral work to be successful it should be firmly rooted in the locality and be part of ongoing work which would continue after the election. After a sharp discussion in the IMG leadership, with at the outset only a small minority of their leadership also arguing this, they too adopted the position of SU as a testing ground for a new organisation and in SU groups up and down the country BF and IMG branches, for the first time, were having concerted discussions based on the need for joint work towards building for an election campaign. This was supplemented by regular national discussion centring on SU but sometimes spinning off into other areas, and contacts were made between our commissions and the IMG's. In May 1978 local elections were fought and there followed a protracted period, first waiting for the expected October election and lasting till the election was eventually called for May 1979 when SU work still continued. In addition there had been serious discussion in BF after Socialist Challenge was launched in early 1977 and then declared its openness to others, and also, of course, discussion about the talks with ISA and IMG. In this period (1977-78) there was discussion about whether we should work towards possible fusion with the IMG (and with ISA), or join in Socialist Challenge and drop our own paper. All these things were discussed throughout the membership. In the end (still in 1978) we decided clearly to reject the possibility of an immediate move towards fusion with the IMG. The decision was taken on an assessment of both our extensive experience on the ground and of general political considerations, which will be summarized later. We declined to sign the joint declaration and argued with the IMG (and ISA who tended to agree on this point but still thought signing might be of some use) that mere signature to a declaration towards a desired goal would cut no ice because there was no adequate political basis and the situation in the areas did not warrant it (based on an assessment of the situation of BF, IMG, ISA and independents whom we would hope to interest in a new organisation). We think this was shown to be a correct judgement, unfortunate though this may be, by the response to the declaration. Our added signature would have made only a marginal difference because people could see that nothing fundamental had changed. After our refusal to sign the joint declaration our relations with the IMG generally cooled and there was certainly no basis at all for the sudden renewal of offers for fusion talks which the IMG made to BF in August 1979. This certainly appears to us to be a somewhat disingenuous tactic taken in hasty response to our suggestion of fusion talks with the ISA, rather than something well considered and taking into account the known differences between us.

In this period we had felt much closer to the ISA, based on occasional discussions and meetings, but we had very little, if any practical collaboration with ISA members. We expressed this closeness by, soon after the ISA was formed, offering ISA a seat on the Editorial Board of our journal, 'Revolutionary Socialism', which we were trying to involve non-BF members in. This offer was accepted in principle but no one was available to do it. Later we repeated the offer to ISA in late summer 1978 when ISA decided to renew their interest in the journal. It was later in 1978 (November) that ISA, who were still obviously discussing launching of the joint declaration with the IMG, brought the IMG into the journal discussions, which understandably caused quite a bit of confusion in BF.

Needless to say, experiences of working with the IMG were, and are, both negative and positive. Often in specific areas it changed completely over this period - from good to bad or bad to good. But despite even the many positive features of the cooperation (including the important effect

in initiating serious discussion inside the SWP at their 1978 conference on the nature of the SWP's electoral intervention) there was no doubt that, in the minds of the great majority of BF members (and I imagine IMG members as well) there still existed very important differences on the ground in all manner of tactical and political questions. To illustrate these here is beside the point since everyone in the ISA or BF (and again presumably the IMG because some of their members see this quite clearly) can think of their own experiences. The central question is: do these experiences flow from a substantial and more general difference in politics? And, even if so, could such differences best be resolved inside one organisation? Or, even if not, would improvements in organisational resources to aid and develop the class struggle be gained by being in one organisation outweigh the disadvantages of the political problems created?

### Big Flame's differences with the politics of the IMG

Our general political disagreements with the IMG flow from a difference over the IMG's concept of the epoch. For them the 20th Century is relatively undifferentiated both in general and in more particular situations. The whole period we are in is the 'epoch of revolutions' which does not help to explain why we are further from revolution now than in 1918, though nearer than in the 1950s. BF believes, along with the 'IS tradition', that the postwar period has seen a strengthening of the materialist basis for reformism (in such concepts as 'do-it-yourself reformism' and 'the shifting locus of reformism') as well as a more complex permeation of all aspects of society by capitalist ideas and institutions for the reproduction of those ideas. Similarly the IMG overemphasize the question of leadership in the reformist camp, overemphasize the role of the vanguard party, as present constituted, to challenge that leadership, and overemphasize the question of, and simplify the content of, 'the programme'. On Portugal Mandel said one year after the revolutionary movement was smashed in November 1975 (see interview in New Left Review 100) that the situation was still 'pre-revolutionary'; also the fact that 'workers' parties', including the social-democratic Socialist Party which was at the time the prime tool of international capital, had won a majority of the vote showed how strong the movement still was. This ultra-leftist mis-reading of the actual situation flows, we believe, from an erroneous political method and the example can be matched by numerous examples from the history of the IMG and Fourth International. Whilst we (and most ISA supporters) have believed this to be the case for a long time the important question is whether the IMG has changed recently, especially given its support for an autonomous womens' movement and Socialist Unity, very good work in many areas and a politics and practice which has generally improved greatly over the past 4-5 years.

An important example given at the ISA conference (by SM, in fact, though I am sure the IMG would agree) will illustrate the key problem we see in the IMG. The example came in the discussion of 'Beyond the Fragments and democratic centralism. For SM and the IMG the need after the revolution is for a democratic-centralist party to run the state. He quoted the example of Russia where the Bolsheviks, soon after coming to power, smashed a strike to safeguard the state and the revolution. The argument was that you have to structure your organisation now in the way the revolutionary process will be carried out. We agree that you should build revolutionary organisation according to how you see the revolution but we think the nature of the revolutionary process itself ('classical' leninism) is problematical, not a given truth from historical experience which because it 'worked' in one situation should be followed elsewhere. The revolutionary process in advanced capitalist countries is bound to be much more complex and protracted than in Russia. Advanced capitalist countries now are far more complex than was Tsarist Russia. Political power is infinitely more diffuse and the stronger for it. In addition we now have much fuller understanding of the way the class as a whole is divided into sectors and hierarchies of labour power (eg women, blacks, gays, youth). Such divisions have a longstanding materialist basis and

ideological consequences (eg sexism, racism). These divisions will not disappear automatically on the morrow of the revolution.

Nor can such matters be left to 'the party' to solve. Autonomous organisations and politics are necessary both now and in the transitional and post-revolutionary society ie socialism. Therefore they must also be reflected inside the revolutionary organisation and within its politics, as well as in the struggle as a whole. This is part of the essence of the discussion in Beyond the Fragments. Yet for the IMG it is not yet possible to challenge its views on the 'key' questions such as the nature of the revolutionary process and the nature of democratic centralism and the way the organisation needs to be structured now. Failure to recognise such fundamental insights and the fact that certain political concepts need to be modified fairly thoroughly ( not just touched eg crèches for leadership meetings) means that you miss out on a central dynamic within the class struggle as it is currently being fought and thought out. This dynamic must be allowed its space to develop and this affects the party itself, both its structures and its politics. Especially if you're a woman, a black, a gay etc you can recognize any hint of 'tokenism', or not being taken seriously enough, instantly; and you will shy away from an organisation which does not allow specific weight for your needs and the special oppression you suffer within the organisation, especially if it does not 'guarantee' the specificity of the oppression to be recognised in any revolutionary process, or the building of the organisation in the here and now in an integral way. The absence of an adequately positive attitude weakens the ability of the organisation in being able to come to terms with these problems; it hinders the ability of the organisation to be enriched politically by the insights from these movements; and it weakens the quality of the revolutionary process. This weakness does not simply apply to such issues as feminism but equally to all questions including the industrial class struggle where similarly there is a whole lot to be learnt from the new (and old) experiences both in organising (eg rank and file work) and demands and strategy (eg workers' plans incorporating ways of combating and harnessing the new technology).

Examples of political openness and willingness to learn include: BF's support for the autonomous womens' and black movements from the earliest days of our organisation in the early 70's, where we were clearly 'ahead' of the rest of the left; and IS's ability to learn from struggles taking place in the late 60's to synthesise ideas round productivity deals and the necessity for rank and file organisation. I'm not aware that the same things could be said of the IMG's readiness and eagerness to learn from struggles and other political developments (despite no doubt the IMG's subjective intentions) even though it is prepared to change somewhat 'after the event' (eg on the women's movement). A revolutionary organisation should genuinely try to be in or close to the vanguard of the class as a whole, not simply adapting itself to the current stage of class struggle, sometimes making only tactical compromises in its politics. It can only do this if it is receptive to new ideas and open in certain important respects organisationally at the base.

There are several important examples recently that the IMG has failed to change, despite hopes to the contrary.

1. The position of 1978 on the SWP that the IS/SWP politics represents a 'syndicalist break from marxism' showed that the IMG at that point in time (in the middle of its 'open' phase) was not willing to recognise that it had anything significant to learn from the most important and successful revolutionary tradition in post-war British politics.

2. The proposal that 'Revolution' should express its solidarity with the Fourth International. This position may indeed have been reversed recently by the IMG National Committee, but the fact is that an article was written by the IMG and 'Revolution' youth organiser in the Revolution discussion bulletin which advocated this position on the FI, which amounts to an attempt to recruit members of the 'Revolution' groups to the IMG. The point is that either way the IMG clearly seem not to have understood

the major political reasons why an independent youth organisation is essential, which is the basis on which we supported Revolution. Instead the impression is that the IMG regard the independence of the organisation as a tactical question depending on this or that conjunctural situation amongst youth and the membership of Revolution eg deciding when to put the question of a full political programme. Otherwise they could not possibly have allowed the question of support for the FI to be put in the first place. Presumably the consequence of this change of tactic of the IMG will mean that their youth organiser will have to write another article withdrawing the proposal on the FI. The lesson for Revolution supporters will surely be that Revolution is not so independent of the IMG after all but subject to its (not exactly youthful) leadership's changes of tack. It is a strange irony that the decision to push support for the FI inside Revolution took place at precisely the same time as BF was being labelled 'sectarian' for refusing to enter into fusion talks with the IMG.

3. The decision in the European elections campaign to stand an IMG candidate, rather than an SU candidate, with no major political discussion inside SU even though only a month before we had fought a general election as SU. This decision (hardly of much importance to the class struggle, it is true) was a decision of the FI to run an FI slate throughout the EEC in order to promote the FI (not left unity). This obviously flows from their view that the FI is the revolutionary force internationally (despite the fact it has relatively strong sections in only three European countries). More important is that this general position of building the IMG rather than building a wider left grouping appeared to colour the nature of the IMG work during the Socialist Unity campaigns where the IMG seemed more interested in pushing their own organisation and initiatives than in the previous year's local elections.

Such examples as these, together with concerted national discussions round such things as the journal, have served to confirm to us that the IMG remains substantially the same as before in terms of the 'hardness' and 'imperviousness' of its core politics. The impression one is left with is that if the IMG think you are moving towards 'classical marxism' they are prepared to talk with you in an open way, but if you appear to be definitively moving away from 'classical marxism' ie the IMG then there is little point in continuing concerted discussion on the basis for political unity, though joint work would of course continue. It is not an open position to say, as they do, that if a fusion took place they would not push for affiliation to the Fourth International until the first conference after fusion ie 1-2 years later. Rather it indicates the complete opposite - a completely close position. This is because it does not show any possibility in the future of the IMG themselves modifying their politics on such a central question and about which there is obviously profound disagreement. It is this attitude, that of political and organisational 'exclusivism' that, more than anything else, actually precludes any fusion, certainly with BF. It is not simply that we disagree with certain IMG position that prevents fusion talks. Rather it is the unwillingness of the IMG to even recognise definitively and openly that some of its central politics are inadequate in various ways and in principle in need of modification. (This means enriching the ideas, since there are levels and degrees of truth in each of them, rather than completely overthrowing them - throwing the baby out with the bathwater).

The same would not necessarily be true for an IMG fusion with SWP because the SWP share a lot of the 'closed politics', ultimately, of the IMG eg in relation to the actual revolutionary process and democratic centralism; and the SWP obviously have far worse positions than the IMG on support for autonomous movements and united front activity in general. We would be fairly amazed if any fusion between the SWP and IMG were to come about in the short-term; and even more amazed (and delighted) if such a fusion were to be successful, open to discussion in a fundamental way on important political questions, and not lead to the smashing of

the new organisation from within only for a new party elite to emerge. Needless to say if positive developments on this front were really to look like developing BF would be very open to participating. However we should remember that the history of fusions among left groups is hardly one of unbridled success. A recent example is the fusion in 1977 that led to the formation of our closest group in France, the OCT. After the fusion the group had some 1,800 members and a wide periphery. Two years later the group shrank to 500 members and, still losing members and periphery fast, the organisation has recently split, with the majority remaining as the OCT and the minority fusing with the LER (French section of the FI). Many other examples could be cited. The point about fusion is not to try to fuse with anyone on any basis but to fuse only on an adequate and full political basis. (In the physical world there are two ways of making a nuclear bomb or reactor, one by fission and the other by fusion - fusion is the more powerful, but it can still explode, scattering its matter far and wide).

Another related matter is that the IMG should, if it wants to get anywhere with the non-aligned, show itself to be more sensitive politically to the views of others. The IMG's period of concerted joint work with BF was heralded in an interview in the Leveller by one of its leadership's saying that BF were centrist and that they wanted in the joint work round elections to win our best members (and by implication forget the rest). This public position was quickly retracted. We wonder what the IMG leadership really felt during the period of our extensive joint work, during which the IS tradition was described as a 'syndicalist break from marxism'. If they thought that about the IS tradition - a tradition much closer to classical trotskyism than is BF's - then it is pretty clear that they could not take our politics, as distinct from our joint work on the ground, seriously. And it is our politics which motivates our joint work and activity. Ane day IMG politics may be proved to have been 100% right all along but until that is demonstrated IMG should at least show a much greater political openness to others - and openness should not be confused with looseness or lack of clarity.

Even sensitivity on such matters as the respective size of the organisation would be sensible. It was pretty easy for BF to fuse in 1977 with the small ex-IMG (and at the time trotskyist) Revolutionary Marxist Current, partly because we were about ten times as large as them. It is pretty easy for the IMG to offer fusion to BF partly because they are 5 times our size. The right of faction and tendency is not enough (though it is essential). 'Norms' have to be flexible and more relaxed than is the case with the IMG for the openness at the base to be achieved. The intensity of the IMG norms stems from their erroneous concepts of the epoch, leadership, the vanguard, the party and democratic centralism. We have repeatedly said that for a fusion to really work, especially reaching wide layers of independents, organisations must be willing to learn from each other so that the organisation is a genuine political synthesis, (not a takeover or capitalist-style merger with consequent 'redundancies'). We have always stressed the need for a qualitatively new organisation, not just an addition of existing ones. Fusion between existing organisations has to be judged on whether it is helping to create such an organisation which is what the struggle for socialism clearly needs. And there is always the danger that big organisations can be just as much a block as a help to class struggle if it degenerates in some semi-stalinist way. But it is our clear opinion that such a new organisation is not on the cards in the immediate future. The ISA shared the essential elements of this view when it was formed. It was clear that the ISA at that time did not regard a fusion with the IMG as desirable, without wider forces being involved. We think in essence the situation has not changed since then, indeed the political inability of the ISA to form itself into a coherent and sizeable political force is a negative factor in the equation.

## The political basis for unity

Fusion is ultimately a tactical question. Provided certain democratic rights are guaranteed inside a fused organisation it is always possible to argue that on balance it is better to be in one organisation or remain separate. Decisions on fusion should be taken on judgements at two levels: i) agreement on immediate tasks of the struggle and ii) prospects for a genuine political synthesis of the organisations, and others, involved. Whilst we think that the balance is negative in regard the IMG we believe the balance is positive in regard the ISA despite some important political differences eg on the Third World. On immediate tasks there seems to be a lot of convergence between ISA and BF members is so far as we can tell. And we both have greater differences with the IMG eg on the style of a revolutionary paper, having members in the Labour Party etc. Such a convergence is rooted in a similar political method of analysis in the two tendencies, eg on the question of reformism. In addition BF is, we feel, genuinely open at the base. In BF not only are our formal 'norms' more relaxed than in IMG but also our greater political sensitivity (we believe) to such questions as raised in 'Beyond the Fragments' means that we have, among other things, a much higher proportion of people with kids than most left groups.

Secondly, at the level of 'political synthesis' we have stated repeatedly, unlike the IMG, what we see as the positive contribution which the IS tradition makes. In particular we can state quite clearly that ISA supporters can enrich and to a certain extent help transform BF in two key ways: i) they can bring their greater experience and understanding of rank-and-file and trade union work into BF and thus strengthen us, politically and organisationally; ii) they can help with the theoretical task of coming to terms with the key political issues of the post-war and 'post-crisis' class situation; concretely they can help all our publications, particularly the paper (where we shared similar criticisms of Socialist Challenge) and the journal (where the experience and contacts of ISA supporters would be extremely positive - indeed we have a considerable overlap there already). We would also welcome separate discussions on the journal not related to any fusion talks.

If a significant number of ISA supporters were to be agreed on starting a process of fusion with BF, several other things would flow from this which would not happen if ISA supporters remained independent (or if they joined the IMG because for 'physical' reasons alone they would be swallowed up inside the IMG). First, Big Flame (or whatever since there is a suggestion going to our conference that we change the name) would be strengthened in its role of trying to reshape and modify the forces on the left; ex-ISA supporters inside BF would be free to argue for increased unity (including fusion) amongst the left, particularly in relation to SWP and IMG. Secondly BF's sector work, local branch structure, local and national membership, and publications (including the possibility of a fortnightly paper, which some are proposing to the conference) could be significantly strengthened which will enable us to play a more positive role in the struggle. This is because BF is currently just below the threshold, in many instances, where it becomes much more viable as an organisation. Thirdly, ISA supporters can start to regenerate contact with all the ex-IS/SWP members they know (particularly the 50 - 100 people who attended the first two ISA conferences). This is possible to do as an organisation but not as independents. Of the two organisational options open to ISA supporters now (fusion with BF or IMG) only the fusion with BF will possibly help this process, provided that a 'significant' number fuse with BF, so as to affect BF sufficiently to make the organisation more attractive to ex-ISA supporters. Fusion with the IMG will surely be seen as a complete 'takeover' by the IMG because at best, through lack of size, ISA members could only very marginally affect the IMG.

There has probably been an implicit tendency in ISA, as among our contacts in general - particularly those who have been in the SWP and IMG - to play down BF as a serious organisation and therefore to ignore the possibility of strengthening and changing it. We think this is now

changing to a certain extent, and a fusion with ISA supporters could really help to change things. Many people do see us as the only conceivable option outside of the SWP and IMG. A fusion of ISA supporters could be important in motivating others among our periphery finally to join. In addition we can safely say that ISA supporters would 'survive' both politically and personally inside BF because of our healthy internal life. It has also sometimes been implied that BF lacks any national presence and therefore isn't a viable organisation. Although it is true that we are not strong 'across the board' not only did our work in SU show that we can organise effectively around national issues (having a fair influence on the IMG in the process) but also our sector work is often strong. For example at the last conferences of the ANL and UTOM BF organised the largest and most effective caucuses. We did this not simply through our BF members at these conferences but by helping to organise with independents and members of other organisations. We find we can often play a positive role in united front activities as a result of our openness and the fact that other people don't mistrust us. Similarly, just as BF members were inside the women's movement in the early 70's and we were able to learn from that movement so we are now centrally involved in discussing feminism and revolutionary organisation in the 'Beyond the fragment' discussion (a BF meeting the day after the ISA conference in London attracted over 200 people to discuss it). Politics is not only a question of having the 'right line' it is also a question of having the right relationship to the struggle and the movement. Our 'openness' and involvement in such dynamic situations means that we are in a position to raise the question of revolutionary organisation from inside such movements as the socialist feminist current, whilst also learning the lessons that movement has to offer. We believe this is a 'classical marxist' approach and reflects a correct, dialectical relationship between party/organisation, vanguard layers and class.

The past two years have seen BF move politically towards more 'classical' positions eg on the question of voting labour, a clear recognition of the importance of Trade Union work, a clearer understanding of the nature of reformism, more thorough analysis and understanding of the nature of the struggle in the second and third worlds. We believe this open political method is a strength not a weakness. We also believe that an organised political force is needed to help shake up the left in the short term in response to the changing needs of struggle. Unity in action is the crucial thing in the fight against the tory govt. This unity in action will involve wider layers than the revolutionary organisations, though the latter will have an important and crucial part to play. The unity in action approach has been increasing among the left in recent years, including inside BF. We hope that as many ISA supporters as possible who agree with the general approach of BF or who want to check things out further will participate in the ISA caucus discussing with BF. Even if individuals do not want to take us up on this we would be very pleased to collaborate with them in strengthening united activity around particular sectors, trade unions and localities.

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