

FACING THE CHALLENGE OF THE 80s

notes on a political future for Big Flame.

This document has been seen in draft form by about a dozen members and those following wish to give support to the 'spirit' of it (that is, not necessarily every word): John Kimberley, Ray Wilson, Cathy Jayne (Nottingham), Mark Bone, Jack Brown, Tom Hardy (London), Rice, another brother and a sister (Coventry), brother from Hertford, Tom Clarke Lilly Larkin (Barnsley); Sally Hill (London).....

There will be a meeting to discuss this document, motions, amendments, the Conference on October 30th (Friday) in London. Hopefully at BF office.

For some years now, Big Flame has benefited little from its Conferences. We will need more than positions on issues (not matter how insightful they are) and grand statements of intent. For the 1981 Conference, at which debate promises to be lively and decisions couldn't be more important we need to know HOW we are going to put into practice what we decide. This document, and the motions that go with it, suggests a plan of action: three months of it mainly within BF with reports and finely-tuned decisions and then a PUBLIC LAUNCH to make our assessment of the challenge of the 80s something that as many people as possible are aware of.

To save space and time the introduction to this document has been cut; most of it is in the original FACING THE CHALLENGE OF THE 80s article in Big Flame Discussion Bulletin May 81 (no 41) pages 1 - 4. In summary it starts a general assessment of the state of class struggle, it suggests that BF is 'lacking in direction, enthusiasm and confidence', it argues that old ideas will not suffice for this new situation..... Please look back to it.

THE WORKING CLASS IS AT THE HEART OF THE MATTER

We insist that there exists a crisis in BF's relationship to sections of working class people - housewives, black youth, waged workers and many more - and to the working class in general(!!!). We have to find ways of improving our connections and these will need to include rebuilding, in a modest fashion, both our understanding of 'mass work' at a theoretical level and our ability to do it. We need to have confidence that divisions within the working class around income, skill, sex, race, age and nation are ones that are more important to tackle now (not less) and ones that we can tackle. In doing this we'll need to promote a Great Debate about theory and to ally ourselves with others close to 'our tendency' to engage in sussed out practical actions. But more than anything else, that document is about our fatally inadequate notion of building a REVOLUTIONARY PARTY and BIG FLAME'S role in that. BF's confusion, more than anything else, ~~xxxxxxx~~ is something we can and should do something about now.

THE CHICKENS ARE COMING HOME TO ROOST.

We are facing a situation ~~xxxxx~~ in the U.K. where we have neither the organisation nor the demands to feel confidence about the working class's ability to oppose the Tory threat. The previous Labour Government's SOCIAL CONTRACT was crucial in weakening our side of the struggle. Yet we know that BF's record in helping build the kind of organisation (for example, around unemployment, among white workers against racism, amongst women in council estates against male violence) that's needed leaves a lot to be desired (to put it mildly). Of course we started small, the revolutionary left is small, our collective influence is small but that isn't all of the answer.

After all, the theories of the political tendency that BF has claimed to be part of gave us a pretty good headstart. That theory is called the theory of working class autonomy and has at its centre an understanding of mass politics and decomposition/recomposition. Our interest in this is stated in

our MANIFESTO: towards a new organisation. Yet it would seem that rather than expose these guiding ideas to the light of critical examination and so be able to change them and make them useful in today's situation we've virtually chucked them away. Despite Bob Duncan's assertion to the contrary in this DB - he says we haven't turned our back on them - if you ask most people who've joined BF in the last 3 years about our theoretical heritage they will surely tell you "I don't know what you mean by working class autonomy theory". We've lost a great deal of our distinctiveness in BF by neglecting ~~xxx~~ our theoretical heritage; it's urgent that we promote a debate about it. Our conclusions will help us to explain ourselves through our paper - to make BF an organisation with a clearer political role and worth joining.

It's certainly tragic that we've not developed our theory since it's guidance has proved to be right more often than wrong. For example:

the factory floor/new technology are not neutral - a battle of power decides the nature of the production line. We were saying this 5 years before anybody else. The fight in British Leyland over Red Robbo had as its background battles over productivity/independent workers organisation etc. The Steel Strike & Frauds, similarly, were about the kinds of issues in our ORGANISING TO WIN. Yet we are almost irrelevant to waged workplace struggles. WHY?

We've said that non-industrial struggles are necessary to build working class power - for example, around UNEMPLOYMENT, a subject on which we have outlined some very sound views. Yet we don't properly co-ordinate long-term work around unemployment. WHY-

Again, we've said that working class autonomy and recomposition means ~~xxxx~~ a recognition that unless the English working class can throw off its illusions about the British State then it cannot unchain itself. Ireland is our most important anti-imperialist battle. We do have a consistent record on Ireland but often others are not aware of all the work our comrades do (same of Zimbabwe); WHY are we a bit of an INVISIBLE TENDENCY?

Anti-racism/black autonomy. Have we been right to say that racism is materially bolstered by power within capitalism? That independent black socialist-minded organisation is possible and necessary? I think the last decade shows just that. Yet, how many know our views? Were we right in PAST AGAINST OUR FUTURE to say we can neither ignore anti-Nazi nor only focus on that? Were we correct to say that consistent mass ^{some} anti-racist work was needed because otherwise significant sections (like youth) would turn to the fascists? WE WERE DEFINITELY RIGHT. Yet, we are scarcely noticed in the anti-racist antifascist movement that exists? WHY.

Feminism. How many feminists actually know that a mixed organisation (BF) exists that supports women's autonomy? WALKING A TIGHTROPE as well as earlier documents like WE WON'T PAY, THE WOMENS MOVEMENT AND THE MOVEMENT OF WOMEN insist that a struggle over what we now call patriarchy cannot be left until after the revolution. (and don't forget that We Won't Pay was 1975) Yet, the important debate about marxism and feminism (like the Heidi Hartman article on its UNHAPPY MARRIAGE) doesn't even bother with our distinctive view. It's like going back to START and not collecting £200. HOW has this situation come about?

Of course, the working class movement is faced with a super mighty force that operates forcefully at an international level and uses every division to maintain its power and its profits but we must accept that if our tendency was much more influential then our chances of slaying the beast would be considerably better. HOW CAN WE INCREASE THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THAT TENDENCY? What can we do to change the balance of forces towards the revolutionary left in general and the working class autonomy tendency in particular?

In part it's because we haven't sufficiently aided the building of mass independent working class organisation that fights divisions at every level and weakens reformism while strengthening itself that an assault on this government (for a start) seems so difficult. THE CHICKENS ARE COMING HOME TO ROOST. Workplace organisation is under threat, sexism and racist solutions are becoming more common. How can we turn the tide?

THE PETALS OF THE REVOLUTIONARY FLOWER

Many of the answers to the questions above can be laid at the door of BF having an unclear ideax of what the role of BF is. How we explain ourselves to others, how we operate, what areas of work we try to build over several years. This Conference can - and must - help us to clarify these issues.

Building the struggle

work at the heart

Fighting Divisions - Ireland, Imperialism gener. of a conscious movements, support for a conscious culture of se...

Keeping Right On - fighting reformism

The best of our theory (it has been said) includes the view that a mass working class party necessary for the period of revolutionary change can only be made up from different parts.

We do not accept that a break from 'the mass party of the working class' (ie the Labour Party) will be the way that party is built

We do not accept that a single vanguard organisation (like SWP) or a fusion of such organisations (like BF & IMG) will become bloated with recruits and carry the moment.

We do not accept that trade unions or campaigns alone will be enuf.

We do not accept that womens or black organisations alone can make the revolⁿ

We do not accept that there can be socialism in one country (eg England)

We do not accept that anti-imperialist struggles alone will do the trick.

Instead we should see the process rather like LIVING AN EARTHQUAKE. In our pamphlet, FIGHTING FOR FEMINISM, we quoted A Sofri who was talking about a struggle in Lotta Continua about feminism: "A delegation of women comrades, - a very large number of women from many cities - invaded the NC office and our debate. This is a scandalous thing to happen to an orderly political party - but an excellent thing to happen to a healthy revolutionary party."

That is, the ground will constantly be shifting. It's right that the L.P. should be shaken up by the left, it's right that womens & black movements should be constantly changing what the unions and Left groups fight for, its right that working class women should be changing what the womens mvt stands for ... and so on.

Within this we need to outline a clear political role for Big Flame as one of the petals on the revolutionary flower. This flower won't blossom without the growth of all of its petals - the growth of rank and file workplace & community organisation; autonomous movements around sex, age and race, solidarity movements with anti-imperialist struggles, links with those latter struggles, co-operation between political groups like BF: the open flowering of the politics of our tendency.

In BF, despite having these ideas 'hovering around' us we have simply not been clear what they mean in practice. We need to be able to answer the questions i) when do we take initiatives? (lack of initiatives in our waged workplace activity has been a big weakness, similarly, lack of initiative in building an antiracist mvt among white people...)

ii) when do we offer support and what does that mean? (It could be said that the support of the autonomous womens movement by many BF men is only moral - we should support it. This is not a basis for political struggle)

iii) when and how do we build solidarity movements (something we've paid too little attention to)

iv) when do we push the ideas of our tendency, when do we recruit to Big Flame?

It's by answering these questions and laying out a plan of action to put them into action that this document now turns.

Is there any doubt that our very attractive notion of the conditions for the development of a revolutionary movement and party is something people are

JUST NOT AWARE OF? It's a burning question on the revolutionary left and involves debates that we ought to be pushing forward. How many BF sympathisers say we're OK but they can't see the point of BF. One of the reasons for the move towards the Labour Party is because militants can't see a future elsewhere - they are making compromises. One proposal to be made is that the new-type BF magazine should focus a couple of special issues on building the revolutionary movement and party - they could be about mass-based work and commitment, about feminism and having a professional revolutionaries 'lifestyle' - so many things to debate. In turn, now, this document looks at a) our Tendency b) mass work c) fighting divisions d) reformism e) building BF.

In summary, the PETALS OF THE REVOLUTIONARY FLOWER ~~xxx kxxxx~~ require this kind of attention:-
 modest rebuilding of mass work
 more support for autonomous mvts
 growth and clarification of our tendency
 fighting divisions (race, sex, age, nation)
 building BF.

BUILDING OUR TENDENCY.

(1) OUR TENDENCY EXISTS WITHIN THE CLASS

Firstly, what is a tendency? (see MY document, 1976). By tendency we have understood one side of the nature of the working class. "The working class has two sides - a dual and contradictory nature". Under capitalism the working class is the labour power that the system lives on...it constantly negotiates with the bourgeoisie for the sale of that labour power. But the working class is also the class that will bury capitalism.. BF Manifesto The tendency within the working class that takes power from the bosses and state, which puts forward demands that unify, which undermines the racist, national, sexist power-hierarchy in the international class itself - this is the tendency of working class autonomy. We have understand that this means that a struggle exists wider than the factory and that we can help ~~push~~ that struggle towards its political development - we don't say we will bring in the necessary ingredients and penetrate them into the class.

(2) OUR TENDENCY ON THE LEFT ARE THOSE WHO KNOW THIS.

The Emerald Street group say that the number of cdes in or close to our tendency is probably smaller than Kimberley (Nottm BF) has argued. The number doesn't matter. What counts is that BF is not the sole repository of our politics. Our kind of politics is supported to a smaller or greater extent by others outside BF. If we take up the plan of action proposed at the end of this document then it would mean seeking to debate and co-operate with a lot of other comrades, both locally and (inter)nationally. XX

Some we might like to see as very close to us - for example, the Conference of Socialist Economists has within it a number of people arguing similar positions to us on the Labour Process. This years Conference was on a theme close to our hearts EXPLOITATION AND OPPRESSION. This is room for debate and joint work with some of these people. We should regularly intervene in CSE events - do workshops, leaflet, bookstall.

There exists a network of Community/^{TU}Resource Centres like in Coventry (workshop) and Nottingham (118). They often have a good sense of politics - new technology, mass, feminist, learning skills is political direct management committees. Similarly, the remnants of BEYOND THE FRAGMENTTS contains aspects we agree with. Many independent revolutionaries work in local projects like Point and Click or Rent-a-Snap. Community Festivals, Local Papers - often because they want to work within working class communities. It's wicked that we don't set up a dialogue with this people.

And a dialogue must be what it's all about. We can't afford to either turn our backs on militants with similar aims - but neither can we over-estimate their closeness to us. The 3 month investigation process in BF ~~xxxxxxx~~ ~~xxxxxxx~~ being proposed would

have to decide WHO to relate to and HOW. It's likely that there are many members of the SWP with politics close to BF who don't know our positions. We should make them clear to them. And the recent criticism of the RCG by a Liverpool comrade was surely also a step in the right direction (it was in the paper). If cde McKenzie is right, there will be people in the Labour Party who it will be urgent to have a dialogue with.

FOR A MASS WORKING CLASS PRACTICE - for the modest rebuilding of mass work.

Big Flame's crisis is more about our increasing distance from the lives and struggles of working class people than about anything else. Without being inside these struggles no organisation can learn or grow.

At last, Big Flame is going to have a weekend school on exactly this issue: BUILDING WORKING CLASS POWER IN THE WORKPLACE AND THE COMMUNITY - mass work, past, present and future. November 7/8 Nottingham. It is no accident that people supporting this document have pushed this weekend school. Hopefully, documents for the school will take up many of the thorny questions and so it won't be the purpose of this document to cover them at length.

A few comments and proposals. Mass politics means politics that doesn't just direct itself mainly at the representatives of working class struggles but recognises that politics is going on in communities, schools, workplaces, launderettes and the like but needs to be brought out, strengthened and clarified. To this our practice needs to be based there - it's no good doing a 'mass' leaflet on something and then scattering it to shoppers who we have no form of contact with. And within those situations, the many aspects like racism can be most effectively taken up.

Secondly, mass work isn't only about the waged workplace. For example,
 ROCK AGAINST RACISM -- for some has been an attempt to get involved with working class youth
 TROOPS OUT -- some groups, like B'ham which has had BF cdes in it for a long time, tries to do mass work.
 ANTI-RACISM ANTI-FASCISM -- some committees, like Leamington, try mass work
 WOMENS AID - of course, directly involved many working class women.
 FEMINIST CAMPAIGNS/GROUPS on working class estates - such as the Nottingham Pregnancy Testing Group - are based amongst working class women.

This whole area throws up questions which BF neglects at its peril and the "Working Class Power" weekend should help us.....

Thirdly, the model of mass work which many of us have run away from in BF is the 'external' intervention; that is, choosing a sector like Steel and then co-operating with internal militants through leafletting and the like to build ~~an~~ independent working class power in a number of factories which is both self-organised and increasingly political and which links to other workplaces and to consumers of the factory. This requires a lot of energy. It's worth noting that Cde McKenzie suggests that in the (long-distant) past BF used to turn its back on militants who had any official position (like shop steward). If this was true, it shouldn't be now. However, while feeling that one day BF (with others) should set up some new 'external interventions' (OF COURSE WE SHOULD) this is not our most important immediate task.

Our immediate task is to give maximum support to 'internal interventions', which is a fancy way of saying that where BF members and sympathisers are already doing some kind of mass work we should give them maximum support. This is something we don't do at present. There are a few BF cdes in waged workplace areas - like cars, transport, council employment and in community mass work situations like over housing, with youth and in feminist mass work situations (like Womens Aid, Pregnancy Testing) and whatever else??? Who knows. We should start by making a list. Then consider how local branches, commissions, the paper/magazine and Nat'l Cttee can give the proper kind of support. Ideas suggested so far are these:-

Commissions should organise special meetings for, say, all the cdes involved in council employment or members/sympathisers in cars (these would be called fractions) to work out jointly a political position on building working class power in that area. We might think about bulletins, open

meetings.

Branches might consider having a cycle of meetings, one of which each month is deliberately about developing a mass collective practice - there might be two members in education or housing struggle and then together with others help they might organise better a BF collective practice.

The paper (and a mass-orientated magazine) should have material which is aimed to directly be of use to militants in a particular area - for example, a guiding light in discussions of what future papers should contain would be "What would be of use to our members/sympathisers working around Unemployment?". It would include facts & figures, a strategy for fighting unemployment, showing how particular projects have got off the ground, taking up some of the arguments that militants have to be able to deal with: like women should concede jobs to men. WE SHOULD TEACH EACH OTHER HOW TO WRITE WITH A LIVELY PROLETARIAN STYLE - too many of our writing hides behind university language.

The NC, as a guiding committee of BF, would need to have a hand in all this. One example, it might co-ordinate a BF Day School on Racism and Ireland - the present situation ~~xxxxx~~ cries out for something of use on this for mass organisers, Or set up a discussion on how to ~~xxxxxxx~~ start a WORKING CLASS MEMBERSGROUP.

We are supposed to be an organisation - accepting our limitations LET'S ORGANISE. Why be afraid to take initiatives - we have missed so many chances. In conclusion, it's better to be an organisation with a good solid political practice in a few sectors than to have a superficial practice in many.

FIGHTING DIVISIONS

SUPPORT FOR AUTONOMOUS MOVEMENTS BECOMES MORE IMPORTANT NOT LESS.

No doubt Suddes, McKool, Banks and Crowley are correct when they say in the September DB "The problems of capitalism are being used to re-inforce the old patriarchal and racist notions of superiority and dominance. Anti racism and the struggle against sexual subordination, far from being issues at the periphery of political struggle, have been thrust to the centre of the stage by the very movement of capitalism in crisis."

F Read gives general marxist reasons for our support for autonomous movements in BLACK AUTONOMY: why BF offers uncritical support. And a lot has been written about support for autonomous movements....a couple of things to be said this time.

We have almost entirely neglected the GAY MOVEMENT. This needs to be rectified almost immediately. BIG FLAME should have a discussion on the gay movement, sexuality and class. We would need to consider arguments like Do we support gay mvt autonomy? If we do is it out of a sense that 'even gays have rights - as long as they leave other people alone' (!!) or that gay relationships challenge the sexual rules of a capitalist society which relies on mens power of women in the family to maintain its power.

Secondly, autonomous organisation - of youth, of women, of black people - is something we're talking about in working class situations like Unemployment Centres and workplaces, youth clubs and communities.

Consistently, the various Petals of the flower so far discussed in this document are not new to what BF does (that's not the problem - the problem is a planned strategy and overall political clear-mindedness about what we're doing) and there's no better example than this one. The paper has recently had an excellent article on Girls Clubs 'WHO NEEDS BOYS' and given space to an interview with SODHALL BLACK SISTERS. Exactly what we should be doing.

FIGHTING IMPERIALISM

And other Petals on our Flower are necessarily support for anti-imperialist struggle - with various antiracist links. None of this is new to our discussion in BF. Garrying several articles and beginning to build links with the Welsh Republican Socialist Movt is an encouraging sign. Ireland may need to ~~xx xxx~~ stay our main anti-imperialist focus.

A GENERAL POLITICAL ORGANISATION SHOULD KNOW WHAT SUPPORT MEANS.

While we do develop our anti-imperialist work and support for black and womens autonomy (at least as a principle in our ideas) there is a big need

to rapidly clarify what support for autonomous movements means. In general it means challenging the nationalism, racism and sexism of English culture and the power system of society. How do we do this? :-

One of the points where this year's Summer School left off was whether there needs to be a big debate/some organisation about MEN AGAINST SEXISM in BF? Surely there does? Surely it is worth trying for men in BF to copy the american example and try and work with 'men who matter'. Surely the communist movement isn't going to develop unless revolutionary men take responsibility for rechanneling male hostility to womens freedoms (hard won) into reconstructing society rather than just building the same old relationships again.

In general, we need to produce detailed proposals on how to get inside the organisation of material advantage and take on the fight against sexism, racism and nationalism from both ends (controversial this). For example,

Are songs like A Guinesses "Manpower" are contribution to men's anti sexist awareness?

Does promoting Republican songs help to explain the Irish struggle
Can we discuss the obsenities of Western culture - waste, war as a way of life, idealised nuclear family when wanting to refute racist and Europe-centred ideas

In popular music, how highly do we value things like GHOST TOWN, INVISIBLE SUN (about Ireland, no 2 as this goes to press), I WILL SURVIVE, UNDER YOUR THUMB etc as forces for change?

All this needs considering.

FOR A WORKING CLASS SEXUAL POLITICS.

But these arguments come a lot clearer when you put them into a working class context. So, to take an example of sexual politics. (It could have been anti-imperialist or anti-racist politics).

"Individual solutions, personal consciousness-raising, have never been a threat to the powers that be. It is the spectre of collective action, working class collective activity which threatens the bastions of power..." (Socialist Worker 28 March 81)

Socialist Worker couldn't be more wrong. Without a political struggle about the issues of everyday life, mass collective politics is still-born.

If we are to turn BF as an organisation out (both the organisation and the paper) to be of direct use to those organising in working class situations then some of the work we've begun already will become even more important. We would, for example, have to remember the politics of HOUSEWORK - an issue that's been neglected in BF for ages, yet an issue which is slap bang in the middle of the lives of working class women. We could usefully campaign in our paper for autonomous organisation of women in various campaigns like C.N.D. or cuts committees or unemployment centres. We could usefully take up sexism in the workplace. (Hopefully these three subjects will be discussed at the weekend school in Novembbr).

But there's no way that antisexism (even of a minimal kind like sharing the childcare) will be comprehensible to most men unless it's made comprehensible. Take the classic case: a bloke loses his job, his wife does a bit of cleaning on the side to add to their dole money, the eldest daughter is starting to knock around with black lads who aren't very respectful towards adults (or the police) and the recent baby is always mithering. XXXXXXXX If he reacts to this chaos by being heavy, not sharing the housework, perhaps by spending the money in the pub or perhaps by violence we're not going to tackle changing what he does by saying "You shouldn't do that!". Moral positions are ineffective. He likely won't even know what you're on about.

Of course, much of what we will be doing is perhaps supporting the women (maybe through Womens Aid), getting into Girls Clubs, antiracist work with youth (RAR, leaflets on white estates etc) but HOW do we relate to him?

There needs to be a PROJECT to develop a working class sexual politics and surely it would include being able to clearly and simply discuss the dynamics of various ordinary situations. Apart from writing things that any working class person might relate and make sense of (below) can we think about things like giving out leaflets to men on a MEN AGAINST SEXISM basis, like outside pubs, factories, the dole queue? Anyway, what would make a

sees fighting divisions as central to it. The first part could be a period, say of 3 months, with us writing reports, working out who to contact/debate with, how to tackle this racist culture, a major perspectives discussion etc within the broad guidelines set by the second part. What should be our relationship to the different petals of the revolutionay flower?

Certainly, modestly improving our mass practice, beginning our plan of activity to increase our support and solidarity work but also, what initiatives could we be taking?

~~xxx~~ Many potentially sympathetic to our politics have never heard of us. And among our sympathisers, many won't be at all clear what we stand for. We should certainly seek to improve our public presence. Let us be seen by what we do (next paragraph) but also, we must be able to put ourselves across clearly to more people. Have all BF members seen "Introduction to BF Perspectives" produced by Education group last year? (Intended for use with new members in their 3 months associate membership). At public gatherings do we put out leaflets (where appropriate), carry a banner (where appropriate), how many cdes have got BF badges? Who uses the 10 point leaflet on WHAT IS BIG FLAME? How effectively do we put ourselves in situations where we might win new recruits to socialism? Do we discuss membership with sympathisers? Do we produce local bulletins (like Coventry do) Can we organise fun-stalls (like ELB F did recently)?

Would we be able to produce Posters on Issues, badges and other artwork as BF (Three Nottm people sold the paper in a local market recently using a Communist Party poster which said "Government for the rich, by the rich, of the rich").

Do we have a good working relationship with militants who are in unions, communities, the Labour Party, whatever...are we part of networks?

In our publications (and in other people's) can we advertise our own publications. For example, the paper should carry an advert for ~~xxxx~~ one of our publications each and every month. (Explaining ourselves through publications is important and perhaps a PUBLICATIONS CTTE would be a good idea).

While explaining ourselves is important, it will mainly be through improved organisation that we'll develop. Can we organise a debate on issues of the day and involve others (fairly) close to our tendency in it? (with planning we can). Can we organise interventions in a few areas (like education). Can we begin a stunning series of articles on Sex & Class for every militants next-door-neighbour?

Can we change the operation of our Commissions (to include more specific organising - fractions), of our branches (to give collective support to particular areas of mass work) and of our national committee (make it smaller yet more set up by voting for candidates political positions)?

Can we make our newspaper a paper - that is, rather than pretend to mainly carry the news in an interesting way (which is a lot of what we do now) instead to be more of an organiser. What do those who work in working class situations need? Information, advice, arguments? - we should relate to the needs of mass organisers. The magazine would be better, too, if it had the same audience in mind.

Big Flame (under a new name!) is worth sticking with, pointing on a new course and getting people to join. That's it.