

## A PERSPECTIVE FOR BIG FLAME IN THE 80's

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Mrs Thatcher: "If our people say 'to hell with what I produce, I demand a certain wage', then there soon will not be a job in their industry and they will have created their own unemployment."

Ronald Butt: "How do you set about explaining or persuading people not to do so?"

Mrs Thatcher: "They are learning...I think many of our employees know the harsh realities and most of them prefer to do a decent day's work, if they can shake themselves free from some of the union structures."

Big Flame has started on a discussion on revolutionary strategy for the 1980's. We think that it is vital to Big Flame's future and its survival that the whole organisation take the question of revolutionary strategy seriously in the pre-conference discussions. Unfortunately BF has approached this discussion from a tangent - from the perspective of either joining the Labour Party or not. We'd like to make it clear at the onset that we see the issue of joining or not joining the Labour Party as a subsidiary, secondary question to that of strategy. What we have to say involves a positive attitude to some members of BF joining the LP, but it would be a travesty of our position to suggest that it revolves around the LP. Our intention is, rather, to recast some of the founding ideas of BF - the notions of divisions within the working class, the question of autonomy of oppressed groups and how we build resistance and working class power - within the context of the impact of the recession and its management by the Tories. And to recast them in such a way as to provide us with a politics which can be applied to a particular political situation. In other words, with transitional politics.

What we are trying to do in this document is to grasp the main elements of the political situation, and from there to outline a series of fundamental problems which are posing the greatest danger to the working class, as so to provide our militants with an analysis which can inform and structure all BF branch work. By its very nature such a document cannot cover all areas of political struggle nor can it determine exactly what a branch would do in Yorkshire or in London.

We place a great emphasis on the recession because the working class itself is being transformed by the force of the recession and through the management of the economy by the government. Mass unemployment - we will argue - is the basic regulator of class politics in Britain today. It is at the centre of the political stage and very few areas of political struggle - be they feminist or anti-racist struggle can escape its influence. Our arguments are based on the more detailed account of the impact of the recession on divisions within the working class contained within Slump City: The Politics of Mass Unemployment by A. Friend and A. Metcalf (Pluto Press).

### The Recession

What is this recession? First of all it's international - a world recession since 1974 - the first since the 1930's. It's a

prolonged recession - there is no end in sight - a return to conditions of full employment and high growth does not even figure in the verdicts of economists surveying the world economy. And there are good reasons for believing that neither the political or economic conditions presently exist which would make a return to world economic growth possible within capitalist mode of production. Second within this depressed state of the capitalist world economy, the British economy is extremely weak - probably the weakest of all the major economies.

So what's the result of all this slump and depression? The present level of unemployment is around 3½ million - in terms of the working population about half what it was at the height of the slump in the 1930's. It is mainly concentrated - unlike the thirties - in the big cities throughout the regions. There has been no pronounced regional concentration of unemployment over the last seven years. In a number of big cities there is taking place a profound change in the composition of the working class. In Liverpool, the worst hit city, unemployment - when one accounts for those who work but don't register - is now running at 25%. When you add to this those who work in temporary work, casual work, homework or in the black economy or who are excluded from work because of sickness, child care etc - probably half the adult population of Liverpool is without the security of permanent paid work. Think about it. It's happening in a one time bastion of working class militancy - militancy which has been able to do absolutely nothing about the impact of the recession. And it's not only happening in Liverpool.

Unemployment is no longer another issue to be stacked alongside anti-racism, socialist feminism etc. This conservative government has not treated the recession in a sectoral manner... for this government the recession, and Tory policy towards it, has become the key-stone of all policies. This is not to deny the importance of anti-racist and socialist-feminist struggles, but to recognise that the current levels of unemployment crucially affect some aspects of how these struggles can be fought. The recession has become the chief means by which class relations in mainland Britain are being restructured. How is this done? The government has devoted a major effort to convincing the working class that the only way the working class can cling onto the gains it has made over the course of the post war boom is by putting the fight against inflation first, by ensuring profitability and raising productivity. This is harsh medicine but it will cure the patient, and moreover there is no alternative. There will be casualties but if you're smart you'll see to it you don't suffer. It appeals to basic survival instincts, and it's backed up by the very real fears many millions of working class people have of ending up permanently unemployed. The existence of a huge mass of people marginalised from full time employment is absolutely necessary for the government to achieve its ends. These are in short the wholesale destruction of the structures and ideas of working class organisation and power. Because Thatcher has set her sights on such an ambitious task, it has involved the government actually promoting the recession (through high interest rates, high exchange rate of the pound etc.) In the course of this wide sections of British capital have actually suffered a loss of markets and competitiveness.

with their rivals. Those who support the government faced with CBI criticism have had to be unusually frank in their defence of government policy. John Biffen on the 10th of August tried to rally the Tory wets with a statement which said that high unemployment has brought some significant advantages to the country as a whole. He listed four areas of the domestic economy in which the consequences of high unemployment had been welcome. "They included a reduction in over-manning, a sharp fall in the number of strikes, a lower level of pay settlements, and the halving of the rate of inflation from its peak of just over 22%." The Tories have kept - so far - their full anti-union legislation under their bowler hats, because the recession has done their job for them. When they judge that the class is sufficiently divided and demoralised no doubt they will be presented to Parliament.

### RESTRUCTURING THE WORKING CLASS

We can summarise this under three headings

1. The impact on shop floor practices. For a year, wages in those areas where the recession has hit hardest - most notably the West Midlands - has fallen well behind inflation. This means that workers have chosen to take a wage cut rather than risk creating financial difficulties for the companies they work for. The present level of wage settlements in manufacturing in the West Midlands is 5-8%. But that is only part of the story - the business press is full of stories of how companies have used the 'new mood of realism' to change working practices, to up productivity by getting workers to look after two machines instead of one, to cut maintenance workers and to achieve the same production levels with far fewer workers. The Treasury's recent figures on the steady increase in output per worker is evidence of this.

### 2. Deepening the divides inside the working class

Because of the existence of a racial and sexual division of labour, the recession has not worked impartially. For women the recession has meant that they have lost jobs in the relatively well paid manufacturing sector to find them in the relatively badly paid service sector. They have also lost full time work only to find notoriously badly paid part time work. For blacks the operation of the labour market is even starker - many have lost jobs not to find them; blacks have been losing work faster than whites and for black youth the situation is particularly grim. In Greater London, to take one example, the number of 16-18 year old blacks registered as unemployed rose 25% between February 1979 and February 1980, but for whites the number fell slightly. This is in part due to the 'last in - first out' policy adopted by many unions.

The third section of the working class to be particularly hard hit by this process is youth - of all races and both sexes. Their recruitment to full time work on the derisory scale of payments offered by the MSC supported by members of the TUC, and without any significant protest from the rest of the trade union movement indicates how deep the breach is

between the more secure layers of the working class and youth.

But what we are experiencing is larger than simple unemployment statistics. A whole section of the working class is being marginalised, is finding that it has no permanent foothold in the labour market. Many young people now have no experience of collective action, of union membership, or being part of a class. In this situation there has occurred a breach between the more prosperous layers of the working class and the marginalised layers. Much of Tory policy is designed to exacerbate these divisions by concentrating public attention on scroungers, lawless elements, immigrants.

The problems of capitalism are being used to reinforce the old patriarchal and racial ideas 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 front of the stage by the very movement of the capitalist economy in crisis. The rise in racial violence shows that a working class constituency has been created for this sort of politics.

### 3. Ideology

Accompanying the persistent crisis has been the development of a crisis mentality wherein the survival of the individual or family unit is seen as a fundamental aim to be striven for. Thatcherite politics have offered a radical solution to the crisis, but is one based on exploiting individuals' reactionary responses to the crisis. The power of common sense reasoning, that we cannot spend what we have not got, that the fight against inflation has to be the priority, that the medicine has to be painful to cure the patient, that there's no more room for any more immigrants, that women's first concern must be the family, has never been so evident. The far left has lost any credibility at this level because they have not been able to communicate with the very real fears many people are experiencing. This government has successfully set the terms of the debate: it's no longer capitalism or socialism, but how we can get back to living a secure life with jobs for ourselves and our children.

"It is not only around the need for security in a period of crisis that Thatcherism has been successful in addressing itself to people's real experiences and problems. It has also picked up on the way people experience their relationship to the state. They see the state as a bureaucratic imposition into all areas of their lives. By playing on themes of anti-collectivism and anti-statism the Tories are able to present themselves as the people with the radical policies, who want to transform things. Through the experience of social democratic government socialism has become identified with all the contradictions of the present welfare state and nationalised industries. Indeed it is seen as synonymous with even greater central state power. Another way in which Thatcherism has been able to make use of the contradictions in Social Democracy is that it is concerned with a much wider range of issues than those on which socialists have traditionally concentrated. They have attempted to articulate

deep fears and anxieties by drawing attention to Society's values and morals and not just its economic and political organisation. The Tories have tapped themes deeply embedded in British culture, e.g. the importance of the family, duty, self-reliance. Because the fears and anxieties are real, people will see solutions such as more law and order, more discipline in the family, a crackdown on immigrants, muggers and subversives as attractive. On the other hand socialists have very little to say about such problems as the increase in levels of street crime. It is only when we are able to develop a politics which takes up people's real problems and experiences in a way they can identify with that any popular support for socialism can be created in this country."

#### The Decline of Sectional Militancy

"The strength of the left in the late sixties to middle seventies, which was the crucial formative period for BF's politics, lay in sectional struggles. Often these were industrial struggles, but there were also some important successes in community struggles. Frequently sectional militancy took the form of militant economism. Over the last few years the depth of the crisis and the government's handling of it have clearly brought out the inadequacies of this form of struggle."

It does not convince workers who are faced with redundancy to say - we have the muscle, all we have to do is fight harder, get more support etc. The long and depressing list of those who have chosen to take the redundancy money and run, cannot be dismissed. It signals a sea change in British politics and it has particular significance for BF whose politics in the early seventies included many aspects of militant economism. What has occurred in workplace struggles has also occurred in many campaigns - particularly those connected to struggles for increased social spending, against the cuts, etc.

It is interesting to note that many of traditional transitional Trotskyist demands, aimed at exploiting a capitalist crisis, such as the demand to 'open the books' have not been effective because many firms have been able to open their books to union representatives to show that they were genuinely on the verge of bankruptcy.

The net result of this has been for more and more militants to look for a solution to the problems for the working class being created by the recession, at the level of the State. If Linwood has to close because the parent company says we can't afford to build cars there any more, and we don't believe we can influence that decision, the only way out is to get a government in which will use the power of the state to defend our jobs. Hence the groundswell of support for the Labour Party and the importance of kicking the right wing out of the party leadership. However we believe it would be a mistake to view the state of class relations today as one of unqualified triumph for the capitalist class with the working class suffering the effects of a traumatic and historic defeat. Workers are demoralised, there have been defeats, but also the willingness to fight has been shown

by the miners, Ford workers, and by the reception given to the People's March; and the riots.

### BF: Meeting the Challenge

From this analysis, we can draw two general guides to revolutionary politics today. These are firstly and most importantly: that the primary target for BF activity is to make initiatives and support actions which create bridges and heal the divides within the working class. While this is within the traditions of BF, we see it as necessary to extend our ideas of divides to take in the institutions of the Labour movement. It's no longer enough to concentrate on how workers are divided amongst themselves in a particular factory or on a particular production line. There are even more prominent divides now - between those in work and in a union and those with no access to work or those who work in the sweated industries where there is very little organisation. What this means in practice is - (as we shall show later) - for BF to have an active co-ordinated political practice which embraces both work among marginalised fractions of the working class - in the "grass roots" - and also in the institutions of the labour movement: the Labour Party and Trade Unions.

The second and less important guide to political activity concerns solutions put forward at the State level to the crisis...the AES. Because of the crisis of sectional militancy many militants are beginning to look to a solution to the devastation created for the working class by the recession in the policies adopted by a returned Labour government.

Producing a critique of the AES is complicated by the fact that the AES as a single entity does not exist and that there are major differences between the more and the less radical versions of it. The comments we make here are only very tentative and we hope to include a more detailed assessment of the AES in a later Conference Bulletin. However, we do regard it as ultimately unproductive to approach the AES with a simple distinction between reform and revolution which implies that suggesting any economic political or social programme this side of the revolution means supporting an attempt to solve capitalism's crisis at the expense of the working class. There are obviously real dangers that particular measures will have this effect but others could contribute to the development of working class self confidence and power.

The major criticisms we would make of the AES (which apply in varying degrees to its different versions) are:

- (1) What has been called its statism ie that changes are made from the top down and the role of working class mobilisation is to provide support for action at the level of the state.

- (2) The way the AES has been drawn up by academics and in LP research departments and support mainly solicited from trade union bureaucrats shows little commitment to going out to find out what alternative arrangements people themselves would like, particularly on the local level.

(3) Too much attention is paid to restructuring British industry so that it can compete internationally rather than utilising skills and resources for the purposes of fulfilling the needs of the population.

(4) It is unlikely that the measures proposed will have the major effect anticipated. Expanding public sector employment and a much more ambitious National Enterprise Board will not be enough to challenge the depth of the recession. While there will be some reduction in the level of unemployment it will remain at a substantial level, especially for these at the bottom of the unemployment pile.

(5) Very little is said about how opposition will be dealt with. There is considerable optimism that companies will start investing, the level of delays and blockages by the Civil Service, etc.

All these criticisms from revolutionaries are familiar enough, but more recently feminists have also made major criticisms of the AES:

(1) The AES concentrates on two objectives - full employment and rising living standards and leaves further objectives to a second stage when more direct control of production has been achieved. It therefore ignores the questions raised by the Women's Movement over having a much broader definition of what socialism is. This is a problem which cannot be resolved by adding on a few extra items such as abortion and childcare facilities. The whole perspective has to be rethought for the following two reasons.

(2) The two objectives outlined are those of the male labour movement. The AES assumes a homogeneous working class with those common objectives. Unless divisions in the working class are recognised then when opposition is encountered and compromises made it will be those aspects of the strategy which benefit women which will be sacrificed first.

(3) The way the AES tackles the problem of democratic control is to promote work place control. This fails to include marginalised sectors who lack power in the workplace or who are absent from it eg women in the home.

Despite the various criticisms we have raised we acknowledge the important role the AES has played in raising the question of a transitional strategy. Such a strategy must inevitably be something less than full-blooded socialism, but we believe something more than the current versions of the AES. A debate has started which it is important that we intervene in. However, it is also the case that the AES is marginal to most struggles occurring today and we are therefore sceptical about suggestions that political activity can be hinged around the AES.

#### From Guidelines to Actions

We want to examine what these ideas could mean for five areas of political work. Our ideas on these are guided by the same criteria that we used in relation to the AES. Namely we judge them from the viewpoint of the overall relation of class forces, not by any ahistorical abstract notion of their reformist or revolutionary character. And we also

examine them from the point of view of whether they open up the present level of working class struggle, consciousness and organisation or dampen those aspects down.

### 1. The Riots

Space here prevents a full discussion. But a few points need to be made. The summer riots are the latest event in a long running saga of public order confrontations between the black communities and the police, going back at least to the 71 Mangrove Trial. For the last ten years these confrontations have increased in pitch and scope. But they are also a new phenomenon as far as it is now clear that many white working class youth are as thoroughly disaffected with society and have as much hatred for the police as many black youth. What this means is that the steady haemorrhaging of support for/consent to policing in working class quarters of the big cities is now at a historically low pitch. "This erosion of support for the police has by no means been uniform. There are significant differences between the young and the old. Many people are very seriously worried about what they feel is the breakdown of law and order in British society. Nevertheless the fact that the black community were 'four square behind the youth' in Brixton is a far different situation to five or six years ago when stooges to support the police could still be found within the communities. It is this deep loss of consent amongst those who have borne the greatest burden of the recession/restructuring which poses the greatest threat to the government. For despite its tough anti-democratic stance, this government still has to govern by consent and by consensus. The riots showed the world, and us too, how much consent was left. It is this facet of the riots which produced the most serious crisis of this government's tenure. The introduction of the repressive technology developed in the 6 counties to suppress the riots in England emphasises the failure of strategies involving increased public spending, encouraging the growth of a black middle class leadership and more sophisticated 'community' policies to restore consent." This is primarily because of the depth of the employment crisis in the big cities for youth - which incidentally means that even a Bennite AES would have little impact on unemployment in a place like Toxteth. Of one thing we can be sure - the youth have not been defeated or repressed to the extent where they will accept their lot - SPG and all.

In this situation what should BF politics be? This, from our perspective, has two aspects:

#### (a) Defence work.

The absence of any vigorous defence from the Labour Movement opens up a number of grave dangers. First that greater and greater repression will be used to crush all forms of resistance to policing methods and the economic circumstances of youth. Second that the riots will be the pretext for the introduction of even more draconian laws and judicial practices. Third that by the absence of any



protest about police practices the division between the marginalised and the more secure layers of the working class will be hardened up. Therefore we would argue that a BF priority would be to work for Labour Movement support and defence of the youth. The initiative that led to the S.E.R. T.U.C. setting up a national defence fund for the Brixton defendants - involving LP members such as Paul Boateng is from this perspective an excellent move, and one we should think about emulating in other parts of the country. If possible we should tie this defence work into, and link it up with, the need to defend the erosion of democratic rights. There are problems which cannot be ignored concerning the role of the white left in relation to defence committees. In Brixton the so-called labour movement defence committee was a LPYS initiative which totally by-passed the black community. In addition numerous revolutionary groups came along to the Brixton Defence Committee to lecture the black people present about what they were doing. The Defence Committee decided to exclude whites from their meetings. By doing so they weren't excluding white people from having a role but were retaining political control over their struggle. It is vital that work with defence committees should not conflict with the ideas that BF has supported in the past on black autonomy."

(b) Deepening the loss of consent.

The question of policing raises the most acute problems for revolutionaries. On the one hand the police are the day to day agents of ruling class order - they are an enemy who must be ultimately disintegrated or defeated if socialism is to have a chance. On the other, they have power because they intervene in the trouble torn lives of the population and in some cases bring order and security to sections of that population. You cannot understand the real significance of the riots unless you appreciate that historically the power of the police has depended on the population consenting to their operations. We have now reached a watershed in this process whereby large sections of the urban working class no longer have faith, trust or consent to police operations. As socialists we have to respond to this situation - and how the different strands of politics in BF suggest BF does respond will reveal much about the effectiveness of the politics they espouse. We can see no real place for BF to limit its intervention to a propagandist stance which denounces the police. We have to build on that lack of consent and try to get it spread beyond the police to the judiciary in the first case. One way to do this is to enter the whole police accountability debate...to strengthen those fighting for greater police accountability. This could mean putting pressure on certain LP councillors through membership of certain LPs or backing up the actions of leftwingers on police committees - in Sheffield and the GLC there are certainly opportunities for this - with independent mobilisations; or it could mean the sort of initiative which led to Lambeth Council setting up a working party on police/

community relations which reported earlier this year. Out of this report have come ideas for either an alternative report to Scarman's or for a more permanent body monitoring day to day police actions and able to organise and co-ordinate actions as and when they see fit. All these actions involve close working with both informal/formal grass roots organisations and work inside the LP and Trades Union movement. The important thing is for BF to get its hands dirty and leave the sanctuary of not intervening in these issues.

## 2. Unemployment

From our perspective we would see the most important activities BF should undertake would be to first bring out the racial and sexual oppressions which are embedded in the very structure of capitalist production. What this means is support for the TUC's women's march, and all initiatives which highlight the racial division of labour. Despite the valuable work done over the years by Claimants' Unions, the situation today is that the most important initiatives around unemployment are likely to come out of the labour movement and to rely largely on the labour movement for finance. ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~

Within the context of the setting up of unemployed centres - we would see that once they have established themselves through a combination of advice work, social activities, and self help work (food coops, squatting, etc) the focus of campaigning activity should be directed at the employed workers. We would see this activity around a number of focuses, including the fight for a 35 hour week, the banning of overtime and forcing employers to recruit extra staff, the organising of activity to help workers in the badly organised service sector and sweated industries to improve health and safety legislation. We should be careful not to suggest that unemployed workers are the only section of the wageless and that unemployed sectors are concerned with the struggles of other groups (single parents, those unfit for work, etc) and that womens and community groups are represented on their management committees in not just a token way, but with a real say in the functioning of the centres. A key element of our work around unemployment centres should be to ensure that they are controlled by these groups and unemployed workers rather than the local labour movement hierarchy.

As far as YOP schemes go - again we would see BF combining grass roots activity with work in the institutions of the Labour movement. What this means is support for the self organisation of YOPs workers along with work in the unions and LP to break the TUC and other individual TU leaders from support of YOPs, and to mass LP support for a campaign for YOPs workers to be paid the trade union rate for the job they do.

## 3. Ireland

Over the last few months the situation for those involved in Irish solidarity work has become the most optimistic for some time. The Hunger Strike has forced the issue of British involvement in Ireland into the centre of the political stage.

The elections of Bobby Sands, Owen Carron, Kieran Doherty and Paddy Agnew have destroyed the myth that the republican movement consists of isolated gunmen. There is growing public support for the idea that British troops should be withdrawn and splits are developing in the bourgeoisie with papers like the Sunday Times and the Observer frantically searching for new solutions. There have been shifts in the trade union movement with for example the motions passed at the Scottish TUC and the annual conference of Trades Councils. Probably the most important shift has occurred within the LP. Over the last three years the number of motions on Ireland submitted to the LP conference has grown enormously so that now it is amongst the most popular subjects for motions. Twenty-seven Labour MPs signed a Commons motion calling on the government to negotiate with the hunger strikers. Ken Livingstone has also used his position as leader of the GLC to support the 5 demands and call for Troops Out. The break up of support for bi-partisanship in the LP represents a crucial development in advancing the cause of British withdrawal.

It follows that encouraging the division in the LP and making use of prominent members of the LP to publicise issues are important tasks for the Irish solidarity movement. The London H Block/Armagh Committee agreed that the press conference it set up with Ken Livingstone and Tom McElwee's mother was one of its most successful actions and had far greater impact than any of the national demonstrations. The Labour Committee on Ireland has had a role in bringing about changes in the LP, although a great many other factors have also had to be taken into account.

We believe that the potential exists for developing splits in the LP further and that the LCI is the organisation best placed to advance the process. Therefore we believe that working in the LCI is very important despite the criticisms we have of it watering down its politics too much. This is not to deny a continuing very important role for the Troops Out Movement working with the trade union movement (so far neglected by the LCI), the Womens Movement, black groups, anti imperialist organisations, etc. If support for British withdrawal grows into a mass movement (and this is likely to be a long term rather than an immediate prospect) the experience in other countries such as the anti Vietnam war movement in the USA shows that the movement is unlikely to be confined in a single organisation. This means that TOM can continue with its present demands and make alliances with forces which do not necessarily agree with all its politics (arguing for withdrawal in the long term, not supporting self-determination). It should aim to exert an influence over this wider movement without liquidating itself into the movement. Certainly it should avoid the practice of the more sectarian groups involved in Irish solidarity work who refuse to work with anyone who doesn't have the same principled position.

#### 4. Feminism

Big Flame perspectives have tried to incorporate feminism by stressing the material division between men and women, and supporting the political and organisational autonomy of the women's movement, in particular the socialist-feminist current. But it is no longer very meaningful for us to say simply that we support initiatives from the women's movement, which is no longer, indeed never was, any sort of unified entity. Nor should we simply focus our energies inwards, on building the power of women within BF. The power of women in BF reflects the power of women and feminist struggle in general.

Today women are losing many of the gains of the 70s, and many feminists grow demoralised at the absence of any unified combative movement. But there are progressive developments of feminism in the 80s. And these are the increasing pursuit of feminist goals in the publicly political terrains of the labour movement and the LP. These are difficult and contradictory struggles for women to take on, with feminist perspectives always threatened by the reformist and sexist nature of these institutions, struggles which reveal that there is a material clash of interests between women and men. But while BF women will be active within autonomous feminist groupings, we feel it is now essential to be supporting those fighting for women's interests in the labour movement and the Labour Party.

What we have to be clear about is how feminist perspectives can be raised in all areas of political work. What are their implications for industrial strategy? For demands on the state in welfare, housing, health and child-care? How do we understand and most effectively challenge male violence and rape, fight for what we want sexually and in our personal lives?

In industrial struggles this means not simply demanding a woman's right to waged work - supporting the current "Woman's Right to Work" campaign spearheaded by women in the Labour Party. It means raising demands for a shorter working day and shared housework, showing how the sexual divisions within the family create women's inequalities at work. We have to demand that the labour movement and the LP fight not just for equal pay, but also take up the job segregation of women into the more boring, badly paid and insecure jobs. That they recognise that women as well as men have dependents to support, and frequently cannot, even if they wished, depend on some higher, male "family wage". We know that the recession is hitting women hardest, creating even greater unemployment for women. We need also to know how current re-structuring of industry and new technology will affect the types of jobs available to women. We need to argue that the AES of the Labour left reflects not only chauvinistic and bureaucratic solutions for the working class, but also sexist solutions, in that it fails to challenge women's existing inequalities at home and work.

Concerning state policy, we must pursue strategies which

attack the legal and financial dependence of women on men in the family. This means fighting for change in the social security system, national insurance and taxation which all assume women's dependence on a male breadwinner - just as the meagre child benefits women receive assume women's dependence on a higher family wage. We need also to look at the increasingly racist application of welfare, the denial of benefit to black women with children abroad, and the other abuses of black women and their children.

Finally we have to be clear that strengthening sexist ideology, and forcing women back into dependence in the home, is a central plank of Tory monetarist strategy. Women are to do the extra work which cutbacks in welfare entail. This means that directly combatting sexist ideology and male cultural hegemony must also be central to any socialist offensive today - in particular supporting women's struggles to control their lives without having to "depend" on a man. These perspectives all entail work in the labour movement, and in at least close alliance with the left of the LP.

#### 5. Defence of democratic rights

For over a decade the British state has surely but slowly taken on more and more aspects of the 'strong state.' The coming to power of this reactionary (in all senses) government has accelerated this process. One reason for this is that if you have determined to regulate class relations by creating a dispossessed mass of people, whose conditions of material existence are organised to deteriorate rapidly, when rebellion comes from that mass - you have only one option to repress it and to try and create a broad mass consensus in favour of such repression. While the Tories have been circumspect about their moves to restrict specific trade union rights and even to use the law they have brought in, x they have shown no such caution as regards democratic rights as a whole. If you look through the back issues of State Research for the last year or so, a disconcerting picture emerges: of the British state in full gallop eroding our hard won rights. And this in a country which is arguably one of the least democratic of the central capitalist states.

This is a country where there is no democratic element in the selection of a judiciary who have unrivalled powers to reinterpret the law; a country whose police forces are subject to no effective external authority; a country whose state is protected by the most powerful and all embracing secrecy laws in the West. The list of laws and proposals includes: the Criminal Attempts Bill which abolishes 'sus' and replaces it with offences some of which will increase police powers over and above those they had with the 'sus' law (Police Review noted it 'gives the police wider powers of arrest than they ever wanted'); the Nationality Bill - enough said; the practice of blanket bans on marches; the Parliamentary Home Affairs Committee has recommended changing the law - the Public Order Act of 1936 - to severely restrict the right of assembly - demos, marches, pickets; the Imprisonment (Temporary Provisions) Act rushed through

parliament in a day and a half "- it contains crucial new powers that raise fundamental constitutional and civil liberties questions which received little public attention. Part 1 of the Act allows the government to take over some of the centuries-old powers of the judiciary and set up prisons in military camps; it removes prisoners' rights and gives troops full police powers. Part II allows for these powers to be reintroduced by order of the Home Secretary." The Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act gives the police substantially increased powers.

At this stage it is not possible to outline practical steps to organise around democratic rights. In general though we should realise that such activity needs to have not only a mass campaigning aspect but to also gain the approval/support within the Labour movement not only to broaden the concerns these bodies consider, but also to ensure that if a Labour government is returned they will be repealed.

#### The last question: the Labour Party

Having outlined the range of political questions we see as important we will now say where the LP fits into this analysis. Most people in BF seem to be assuming that by raising the question of some members of BF working inside the LP we have either totally abandoned or suspended for the time being as unrealisable in the present situation such fundamental tenets of BF politics as: we have to take up the whole totality of different forms of oppression; or our main aim should be the independent self organisation of people around their particular oppression. Even if they allow us the benefit of the doubt that we haven't changed our politics they believe that being in the LP is a diversion from or incompatible with these principles. It is precisely because we are looking for ways of struggling around them, more successfully than we have been doing in the current period, that we felt the need for a major reassessment of the strategy BF has been adopting. BF having members in the LP is only one element in the strategy we propose and the way we regard this membership is very different from the way membership of the LP is seen by many others in the party and, we suspect, by some of those in BF advocating working in it. We now think that in our first article in the July DB we placed too much emphasis on the role of a left reformist government allowing more space for the working class to regain its confidence after the assaults of Thatcherism. The reasons why we have partly modified our position are outlined below but, briefly they are based on an uncertainty as to whether a genuinely left reformist government will come to power for some considerable time and uncertainty as to the precise impact of such a government on the struggles of the working class and other oppressed groups. Because of this we don't feel that the aim of bringing about a national left reformist government is sufficient reason to justify working in the LP now.

The argument has to be made in terms of what is possible

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in the immediate future by constituency Labour Parties and local Labour Councils. Our fundamental aims are: First, to use the positions we may have to make initiatives and work in areas which unify forces inside the labour movement (LP and trade unions) with forces outside. Secondly, to use these areas as forums for our ideas, to take up issues such as our critique of the AES, developing alternative plans, bringing up in these forums divisions in the working class and sexual and racial oppression.

Over the last few years both the growth of a locally based left wing inside the LP and the collapse of many local campaigns which formerly grouped together large numbers of independent militants, suggest that the LP has become (for the moment at least) a very important area for pursuing these two aims. This is confirmed by the key role that LP members have played in initiatives such as unemployed centres, the council enquiry into the police in Lambeth, etc. A year ago it looked as if Beyond the Fragments might provide the forum for some of the ideas we have outlined. Now many of the independent socialists and feminists involved in BTF have joined the LP and the BTF group in London has launched an initiative to enable people inside and outside the LP to relate to the GLC in ways which support what it is doing and takes it further.

Our position is open to misunderstanding. There are two things we want to clarify. Firstly we are not reconciled to the collapse of local campaigns which we must put an effort into reviving by working in them ourselves and by pressuring LP militants to re-join. Sometimes it may be possible to use the financial resources of LP bodies and the greater access to the media enjoyed by LP councillors to help revive them. Secondly when we speak of seeking initiatives which unify forces we must not forget the material differences of interest which underlie the differences and the continuing need for autonomous organisation of the part of people around the own oppressions.

Various members of BF have made four main points in response to the strategy we have outlined. The first argument is to say that the recent wave of riots have disproved the doubts of the pessimists who no longer had faith in the self organisation of oppressed people and directed attention towards the labour movement and LP. We have already discussed the riots above but it is worth repeating a few points. While we (with certain reservations concerning some incidents which occurred during them) welcome the riots as a very important development, we would strongly disagree that the strategic implication of the riots means we can forget about the LP. Given our emphasis on autonomy for black people and youth we shouldn't see our role as organising those involved in the riots. Our role, as we argued earlier, should be giving what support is requested to defence committees and taking into the labour movement the call to support what happened in the riots. There is a grave danger that black and white youth will continue to face greatly increased

police repression isolated and without the support of the organised working class. As events like the riots increase there is also the danger of sections of the working class turning through fear towards supporting fascist organisations. Therefore it is very important for us to be using the institutions of the labour movement to emphasise the connections between their struggles and those of black people.

The second argument is that we are over valuing initiatives taken by left reformists like Ken Livingstone because reforms are worthless when they are not gained through popular pressure. It is perfectly true that left Labour councils have been demonstrated to be isolated from the people in their area and we shouldn't be smug about this situation. In part this is due to insufficient priority being given to winning support for a stand against central government, but far more it is due to the point stressed earlier - the lack of popular support for socialism. The support for our brand of socialism is even smaller. No initiative from either a small revolutionary group or from the LP is going to change this without people's consciousness being transformed through their own experience of struggle. But initiatives from the revolutionary left and the LP can facilitate this process and should not be written off in advance but judged in terms of how likely it is that they will help.

The third argument re-asserts the distinction between reform and revolution to dismiss initiatives coming from bodies like the GLC. This seems a retreat from the past BF position that what makes a demand reformist or revolutionary is not necessarily the content of the demand but things like how they are fought for, how much consciousness is changed by the struggle, etc. Thus a struggle for a zebra crossing on a council estate can be revolutionary. In practice this position never seems to have been applied to initiatives coming from within the LP. There has been the purist assumption that everything to do with the LP must be reformist. Usually the initiatives have been reformist and, as we argued above, there has been insufficient attention given to winning popular support. But we think each initiative should be judged on its merits and not dismissed a priori. More initiatives are emerging from within the LP which involve the possibility of involving people in struggle which can change their consciousness and increase their collective power.

The fourth argument accepts that LP initiatives can be valuable but wants to leave it to those already in the LP to develop them while we get on with other things. But all initiatives can take a more or less radical version. By being on the inside we will normally have greater control over the form they take. We don't want to lay down dogmatic guidelines. Some BF members because of the positions they hold in the local trade union movement, tenants movements etc can exert considerable influence on LP initiatives from outside the party. However we don't believe that this is the case with all BF members.



Our argument for the importance of work in the LP is not that it is the only way open to revolutionaries to prevent the wholesale destruction of working class organisation and morale by fighting for a 'radical reform plan', which presumably is a development of the AES first, this implies a LP victory at the polls, which after Warrington can't be assumed, and that the present victories of the left of the party will continue without major reverses, which again can't be assumed. Secondly, as we argued earlier, there are a whole range of problems with the AES - whether its measures can achieve the desired results, whether it can be implemented, the areas not covered, etc.

Third the revival of the LP is a recent phenomenon - and as yet it is far too early to know whether it will be able to overcome the consequences of 30-40 years of atrophying and withering into a bureaucratic shell which has destroyed many of the organic links the LP once had with the working class. Fourth our analysis of the situation is not one of unrelieved pessimism and gloom; the working class may be divided and demoralised but it has not undergone a historic defeat - combativity is still very much there - witness the successful Ford struggles, riots, miners strike and People's March. To suggest that all we can do is join the LP and hope for a LP victory at the polls is to take an altogether too jaundiced view.

Saying all this does not mean we would not welcome a left reformist government at the national level. It may lead to a demoralising defeat for the working class and other oppressed groups, but the potential exists for it to be a lot more. While the opportunity exists we should try to help bring the situation about. It is very difficult to foretell under what circumstances our capitalist and patriarchal society can be transformed, but it seems unlikely that it will come about without a left reformist government (not necessarily the next one) being a crucial step in creating chances to go further. This is, however, all a long way off.

Our analysis of current developments suggests that it would be a serious mistake to put all our efforts into working within the LP, in the hope that it can be transformed, and that there is an immediate prospect of a LP victory at the polls which will herald a genuine left reformist government. The strategy we are arguing for attempts to both take advantage of the space created by left reformism in the here and now and to maintain BF's long standing commitment to the rank and file and autonomous movements.

From this position we regard both the perspective which sees the solution to the crisis in BF as everyone joining the LP and that which calls for a greater emphasis on mass work as ~~xxxx~~ too one-sided. What we propose is activity which embraces both terrains and sees as its aim the uniting in struggle of different sections of the class, the creation of new unities and alliances.