

BIG FLAME IN THE BLIP CHIP AGE

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THIS is to explain some of the thinking behind the motion on " A NEW STATEMENT OF OUR POLITICS " from members of Sheffield BF. I have found it hard to write. Our discussions have been incomplete. I haven't done enough work on it. My life has changed alot since E. was born 11 months ago. The branch has been struggling . although it has recently revived. With the exception of recent migrants ,we're conscious of our lack of input into the national organisation over the last couple of years. But.....

BF as a whole seems to have suffered more than it realised at the time from the departure of so many key members - both to the Labour Party and elsewhere. Despite our differences of views, we used to have consistently interesting documents written which stimulated debate and atcivity in the organisation. But since the last conference we seem to have lost our way. Many members are unclear about our politics. Despite the good intentions of the "Emerald Street" motion passed in Dec. '81, and the subsequent appeals from the NC, and Kimberley in particular, the political analysis has been sparse. The "more interventionist approach...to..implement campaigns and initiatives " flickered briefly e.g during the hospital dispute, but has found neither consistent direction nor response. WHY ?

THE CRISIS IN BF IS PART OF A GENERAL CRISIS OF REVOLUTIONARY POLITICS This is not to blame everything on outside factors. But the overall effect of (a) International defeats/^{setbacks} (Chile, Portugal, Kampuchea, China, Poland - & now Zimbabwe ?), (b) the decline in domestic class militancy, c) the weakness & fragmentation amongst the autonomous movements, and the decline of "Beyond the Fragments" after the Leeds conference; d) Collapse and/or decline of sister organisations in Europe, especially Lotta Continua, and (e) the "success" of Thatcherist politics and the Malvinas episode in particular for the ruling class - has dealt body blows to BF of a kind which more sectarian/thick skinned or Labour - entrust groups have been able to cushion.

The composition and lifestyle of members have also changed. More of us have kids. For a time at least, most of us had waged jobs. As Ben Roberts has commented in his accounts of the far left in Europe, militants have been less willing to "sacrifice" themselves fo the revolution. Which is no bad thing. But for a small organisation like BF its meant real problems. Some people really have worked hard to keep the national organisation going. And its taken its toll. Quite rightly, we've questioned the value of travelling a hundred miles to a commission meeting we know is unlikely to be well attended. But then those who do

turn up are naturally fed up and demoralised. I'm generalising of course. Some Commissions have revived. The lesson I think is that we need to be more selective. Commissions and working groups on those areas where there is real interest and active involvement - support from the rest of the organisation - acceptance that it may at times be right to stop meeting, or to regroup or to focus on a new area.

PICKING UP THE PIECES - A SHAKE UP OF IDEAS & A SHAKE OUT OF IDEOLOGY

We come out of a rich tradition. There have been many excellent articles in our own publications which have not been followed up. There is a wealth of experience amongst members, ex-members, sympathisers, militants we know. LET'S MAKE USE OF ALL OF IT. It seems to me we need to focus on these areas :

1) CHANGES IN CLASS COMPOSITION - including both the impact of unemployment (predicted at the 1979 BF conference, but never fully acted on), and the changes within the waged workforce. In particular the impact of new technologies. (This incidentally is where the SWP are wrong in dismissing Gorz and others like him out of hand. They underestimate both the decline in the number of waged workers, and the changes in the work they're actually doing)

2) The state of the working class movement. Decline in union membership. Increasing importance of organising in small workplaces; significance of disputes outside "mainstream" heavy industry etc e.g. Lee Jeans, Plesseys womens strikes, Timex occupation, Chix, EDP, Jewel Razor etc . And in the community . What is the state of housing struggles, claimants unions, unemployed centres, under 5's campaigns ?

3) The Relationship between BF and the autonomous movements. Did we depend too much on their growth. What can we learn from the shifts in the womens and black movements in particular

4) Changes in Capital . Financial instability; break up of nation states and national economies ; deconcentration ; capital replacing labour and capital ; decline of manufacturing ; new international division of labour ; privatisation ; speed-up etc

5) The experience of the Tories since '79 . The shift to the right ; the weaknesses its revealed in labourism; the continued significance of nationalism/chauvinism ; the significance of ideology and the need for socialist alternatives.

6) ReThinking the Party and Strategy . Need to update and revise Duncan and McKenzie's "Seizing the Power" (Jan. '79) in light of

the above. Firmly moving away from inurrectionary model of revolution & confronting real problem of revolutionary strategy in a bourgeois democracy - the continuing legitimacy of electoral politics.

BF HAS A KEY ROLE - BRIDGING THE GAPS

Between Communism and Feminism. Between the green and the red. And providing a political focus for those within single issue campaigns and local struggles who share our perspective of an overall anti-capitalist, internationalist and feminist movement .

I'm increasingly feeling that the traditional left ,both labourist and Trotskyist versions are becoming obsolete. They're locked into a politics and ways of thinking which have been overtaken. They put people off communism. They talk of workers control but not the nature of work ; they talk of equal rights, but not liberation ; they propose to spend more on services, but overlook the kind of service being offered; they wish to extend the state, where we want it to be transformed and drastically cut down.

BF has a future (though not necessarily in our current form) because we've been willing to continually reassess what's happening - our politics has major potential because it keys in with what many people are thinking, and doing. But we are also in danger of being overtaken. We have to reinvigorate the political debate in the organisation. Starting with the conference. We need to set down clearly : (A) OUR OBJECTIVES AND DESIRES- what kind of society do we want; (B) OUR STRATEGY FOR GETTING THERE, and (C) THE TACTICS, and immediate demands and priorities. Much has/ ^{some} been written. / Of this will be tentative. We want to share the debate with others. It has to be open and honest. But we can no longer afford the confusion, the vagueness, the lack of education. This may be the last chance. Its not a process that can be solved administratively. Or left to a few members. All branches, commissions, isolated members need to be involved. The summer school, the Discussion Bulletin will be vital focuses. Differences will have to be clarified. But its a collective effort based above all on a political assessment of these troubled times.

FOOTNOTE . We've been asked to say what the differences are between our motion and Terry Sheen's. I welcome Sheen's contribution. He's kicked off an important process. I happen to think he has some of it wrong. A programme is not a strategy. And it doesnt encompass our approach to politics, our style. The full significance of the "personal and the political" I dont see how we have one set of politics for BF and one for the "Progressive movements". I think Sheen's paper should be used as a valuable contribution for the debate. But I wouldnt vote to adopt it at Conference. Its inconsistent. The left has fetishised programmes. Lets get away from the term, and find different words to express what we want to say

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