

A NEW INDEPENDENT SOCIALIST WEEKLY NEWSPAPER - ON A SUNDAY

A somewhat vague resolution at Conference committed BF to 'exploratory discussions on the possibility of starting an independent weekly revolutionary socialist newspaper'. The paper would be 'committed to building both a mass movement and a new working class revolutionary organisation'; and we would discuss with 'existing left groups, non-aligned groups, campaigns and individuals'.

The proposal here, developing an earlier proposal in BF (the paper), is that the independent weekly socialist paper should be a Sunday paper. I also argue that the Conference ^{resolution} is too narrow and perhaps contradictory, and that the paper may have to be more than a 'revolutionary socialist newspaper' if it is to play a part in the building of a mass movement.

When considering the starting of a new socialist paper we must take into account the following, as they interrelate:

- 1: the aims of the paper.
- 2: the projected audience (a: size; b: nature)
- 3: the political-journalistic space available
- 4: the resources available a: financial
b: labour (printing, processing & reporting)
- 5: the projected language and style of the paper
- 6: the projected breadth & depth of the Paper's contents
- 7: the problems of distribution

1 & 2a: aims of paper & projected audience size.

The blanket propaganda operation on Zaire demonstrated once again the pathetic weakness of the Left as regards the media. The only alternative to the hysteria, racism and jingoism of the bourgeois media was provided by the Morning Star, the Socialist Worker, and Socialist Challenge: total circulation at most 50,000; total readership perhaps 100 - 150,000. The problem is of a still more serious nature as regards strikes and other struggles in this country, as these can easily be isolated and/or have their potential political effect removed by media distortion and propaganda.

If the Left is to begin to challenge the dominance of bourgeois and petty bourgeois ideas in the media and the media's role, in disrupting and isolating struggles we must aim at a circulation, at the very least, of 100,000 in the short term (readership about 200 - 250,000).

This alone? No. People's ideas are influenced primarily through struggle, through experience. This is secondary and complementary, but also important.

This at all possible? If we continue with our present ways, no. But when has there been a good quality independent socialist paper aiming at this sort of audience? And when has there been a Left Sunday paper?

The point is, we are talking of a crucial aspect of class power where the working class is in a hopelessly subordinate position. We are only going to change this balance of forces with a determined effort and with a major break with the practices of the past (but not necessarily, mind, with a change in the balance of forces as a whole, as the position of the working class is worse regarding the media than elsewhere). Among other things this means countering sectarianism and aiming at a considerably wider audience than before (the two complement each other). It also means very careful thought and preparation. It also means, I would argue, a Sunday paper

2b: audience composition

In the last 10-20 years we have seen both a marked change in the composition of the working class, and a marked change in the lifestyle of the traditional working class. Not only has there been a 'proletarianisation' of many sectors of office workers, service workers, public sector workers, but also 'proletariat' means something quite different from what it used to - at least in terms of lifestyle.

With these developments, there has been a marked change in the sectors which produce working class militants, and an increase in the frequency with which militancy rises or falls in a particular sector. Because of this, there is no simple approach to assessing a radical paper's potential audience.

Another important effect of this development, as often pointed out by BF, is that the worker-intellectual distinction is no longer strictly valid, so that, while there are still many intellectuals who are not workers, and many workers with a strong distaste for anything that smacks of the intellectual, there is a huge overlap with a great mass of people who are all, to a greater or lesser extent, ~~either~~ both worker and intellectual.

The fact, on the one hand, that some sort of distinction can still be made - as well as the fact that we are dealing with a mass of people with a very wide range of life and work experiences - means that one paper is not enough. In this respect, Socialist Challenge, for example, can continue to serve its useful function of catering for Left intellectuals. The fact, on the other hand, that there is considerable overlap means that a Left Sunday can most usefully complement SC by catering for the large 'middle' sector of worker-intellectuals. These, I suggest, will include people in a wide variety of jobs, many of them in the organised Left, many on the Left of the Labour Party, many who are independent but politically active in some field, many who are beginning to get interested in Left politics and Left ideas. To relate to them all will require considerable sensitivity and flexibility. And a Sunday paper.

3: The political-journalistic space available

One of the strongest arguments for a Left Sunday paper is that, while weekdays are cluttered with Left papers, there is on Sunday no alternative to the bourgeois press. At the same time, the number of people that read a paper on a Sunday is considerably higher than the rest of the week, so that the 'space' available for a Left paper is greater. This makes the above audience projection more realistic.

When starting a new newspaper you can't ignore the nature of the competition. For an independent socialist weekly to start up during the week would be to worsen the competition between Left weeklies for what is anyway quite a small audience. In doing so, it would further reinforce the Left's sectarian image and generally weaken the Left's media position in relation to the bourgeoisie.

To start a paper on a Sunday on the other hand would not worsen competition on the Left, but rather set the Left up in competition with the bourgeoisie. In doing so, forces on the Left could be united behind the paper, and the paper's aim of countering sectarianism could be furthered.

Generally, groups and parties could maintain their own papers during the week and support an independent paper on Sunday. Where, as in the case of 'SC', the group paper is not seen as a 'party paper' there will of course be problems. But the SC project is not likely to succeed and a paper set up as a complement to it is far more likely to be seen as far less of a threat than a paper set up in competition with it.

Finally, more people read papers on Sundays and people have more time for papers. Not only is there a greater potential audience, but also there is a more receptive audience, and ~~and~~ an audience more likely to think about the issues raised in the paper.

4a: financial resources available

A left paper aimed at a minimum audience of 100,000 will need very considerable financial resources. Only an independent left paper is likely to find these resources and, as argued above, only a Sunday paper is likely to succeed in being independent. It is also more likely to be seen as such.

The financial backing would have to be found from a variety of sources - the more successful Left publishing ventures (e.g. NLR/NLB), more radical unions, union branches, trades councils, from subscriptions, the more wealthy individuals on the Left, various fund raising activities, etc. Most of these will only support a paper that is genuinely non-sectarian, genuinely independent. They are also more likely to support a paper with good prospects for success. What else - a Sunday paper.

However, this is not to say that ~~by~~ the question of finance is an easy one, and certainly considerable ~~support~~ ^{thought} would have to be given to this.

4b: labour resources available

The argument is not dissimilar to that for financial resources. A good independent Left paper with wide appeal and a large audience will need many workers, including a fair variety of journalists. To attract enough journalists and an adequate mixture of quality, experimentation, wit and humour the paper will have to be seen to be independent.

In addition, as the paper will not be the main source of income for ~~x~~ most of the journalists, and as most of them will be otherwise engaged on papers, during the week, a Sunday paper is more likely to attract them than another paper published during the week.

Considering the lack of opportunities for independent radical journalists to express themselves as they wish, and considering the number of radical journalists either working in the bourgeois press (mainly provincial) or engaged in part-time work in the radical press, there should be no problem in attracting enough journalists to a Left Sunday paper.

5: language and style

Generally: jargon-free as far as possible; reasonably high proportion of visual material (photos, cartoons); plenty of wit and humour; careful attention paid to layout. Big Flame not a bad example of language, but more originality required in style and layout.

One thing about a Sunday paper is that there is not such a need for immediate impact as during the week, when many people have to flick through the paper in their odd spare moments. Because of this, more articles of an intellectual bent could be allowed than would be the case during the week, though care should be taken to avoid the SC-type approach.

One more point: there is no 'working-class language' as such, even tho' some people on the left pay careful attention to mimicking what they see as one. Moreover, the complexities and differences in 'working-class languages' have been increased by the tendential proletarianisation of many members of the middle-class. A Left paper should not have one language or style; rather it should reflect, as far as possible, the great variety of language of its readership. It is hoped that it can do this without resorting to the grotesque parody of this language characteristic of much of the popular press.

6: contents of paper: breadth and depth

As said above, on Sunday people have more time to read the paper. Moreover, ~~there~~ for some reason the Sunday paper has developed into an institution so that there is an element of socialisation that encourages people to spend more time reading on a Sunday. Because of this, Sunday allows for both more breadth and more depth in the issues covered. This is of obvious advantage for a radical paper, as part of Marxism's strength lies in its overwhelming superiority once one moves beyond the superficial. In this area, then, a Sunday paper has a very clear advantage.

However, again, this is not to suggest something along the lines of SC, with its pitiful lack of localised struggles outside of London. For, while big national and international issues should obviously be covered, emphasis should be placed on encouraging activists from all around the country (as well as Scotland, Wales and the N. of Ireland) to send in reports of struggles and activity they are engaged in, events in their area, etc. The old Socialist Worker offers something of a model for this.

7: distribution

The main argument against a Sunday paper is that you can't sell it outside the factory gates. Against this, I would argue that you're never going to sell more than a few thousand papers outside the factory gates, and as soon as you start talking of a circulation of above, say, 30,000, the problem of distribution is one of newsagents - whatever the day of the week published. Aside from that, I don't see any great advantage in selling papers at the factory gates these days. For one, it's not necessarily the best way to get the papers to workers or to contact workers; secondly, a lot of workers don't work in factories (and don't tell me you're going to stand outside office blocks or the local council offices).

The big problem during the week is breaking the big 3 - Smiths, Menzies and Surridge Dawson. The problem here is that you may well have to compromise to break into them (SC, of course, has to face the Gay News pickets, which is not a pleasant dilemma to be in) and that, once in, you are liable at any time to be thrown out or, at best, to have a whole issue rejected because of a contentious article.

As far as I know, the big 3 are not involved on a Sunday and papers are largely responsible for their own distribution, depending largely on orders through the individual newsagents. This would obviously create problems but would certainly involve less effort in the long run than the present highly inefficient system of selling at meetings, in pubs, to friends, outside factory gates, etc.

Overall, I think the case for a Left Sunday is overwhelming. The difficult task, in the short term, will be getting enough people interested and getting it seen as an independent paper. The problem with SC was the mistrust - for good reason - of the IMG's intentions, the old rivalry between IMG and SWP, IMG's lack of a Party paper and its consequent need to use SC both as party paper and 'unity' paper - an impossible contradiction.

A new independent Sunday paper proposed by BF won't necessarily have these problems. BF is trusted on the Left, it does not have long-standing rivals, and it can keep its monthly paper. The problem will be getting enough people interested to establish credibility and to get others to sit up and take notice. Certainly, there are many independents around who could be approached; the ISA and Workers League may be the first to agree; the SWP, despite their new-found openness, will be very wary, but will not want to miss out on a good thing if it appears to be such; the IMG should join in once they accept the failure of the SC project - assuming it fails and assuming they really are committed to Left unity.