

big flame summer school 1981

- A SADO - MASOCHISTIC BONANZA?

The theme of the summer school this year was 'Sex (gender), Class, and Revolution' or the uneasy marriage between socialism and feminism.

For a week we wrestled with the conflicts, suspicions and tensions which are the familiar and perhaps inevitable accompaniment to the exploration of how to incorporate the strengths and insights of the women's movement in a fundamental way into the struggle for socialism.

We raised the following issues: Can Marxism explain the specific oppression of women or is a separate method of analysis required? Is the analysis of the relations between the sexes as important as the analysis of relations between the classes, or secondary? Will the development of a truly anti-sexist mixed organisation ever be possible or should women put all their energies into organising separately?

BITTER DEBATES

The more bitter and acrimonious areas of debate centred on such questions as: Can men ever become truly anti-sexist? Should women waste their time trying to get men to take the initiative in anti-sexist behaviour guiding, instructing, and encouraging them? Isn't this just one more example of women being pushed into the traditional nurturing and supportive role? From some of the lesbian women the question was: 'since patriarchal attitudes are so ingrained and are woven into virtually every facet of interaction with men, why do the heterosexual women amongst us bother with men? Can someone please explain?'

RELATIONS TO MEN

Many of the women felt on the defensive about their political and personal involvement with men. I would guess the men felt similarly defensive. A large proportion of the women at the summer school (over half?) were non-Big Flame members, that is people close to Big Flame or considering joining. Many of them had come from the women's movement and were wary of being in a mixed organisation. They tended to be very sceptical about the likelihood of men mouth-

ing anti-sexist incantations while remaining essentially unchanged. Many of the BF women members felt differently. They were somewhat less distrustful of the men, and felt committed to trying to make a mixed socialist feminist organisation work while grappling constantly with the knowledge that feminism is still not central enough to BF theory and practice.

However this was not just a sado-masochistic orgy of self-involved BF members. The agonizing which went on is simply a reflection of the larger battle being waged on the left between those who regard themselves as being feminists first and socialists second, and vice versa, and many others who want to find a way of marrying the two in an equal relationship.

WIDE RANGE OF TOPICS

The programme of discussions included the subjects of patriarchy, matriarchy, how to fight sexism at work and at home, in political campaigns, the role of feminism in national liberation struggles in the third world, male violence against women and much more. There were workshops which covered topics less obviously connected with feminism such as the Hunger Strikes (plastic bullet passed round for inspection), the Alternative Economic Strategy, the Anti Nuclear Campaign. The formal discussions, a good number of which were separate sex meetings, were divided between plenaries and workshops mostly chaired by women. Not surprisingly it was the discussions I had at the bar, or while lying on the grass (lots of blazing sun), or walking under the stars at night which often had the most impact on me.



Last night (and late night) revels at the Summer School.

Big Flame photo

SEX AND CLASS

For me the excitement of my first BF summer school came from the amazing diversity of experiences available to be sampled. At almost any time of the day or night by strolling through Beechwood College (a huge, attractive and comfortable house with lovely surrounding grass and fields) you could take your pick from amongst such activities as: an intense group heavily into a debate on the Labour Party; a noisy game of frisby; or hide and seek with the kids; an intimate heart to heart over a drink at the bar; a women's film on video; a sauna; a women's massage workshop; a hearty revolutionary sing song; a quiet game of chess; or a secluded spell of reading from the daunting pile of papers circulated for the week's discussion topics.

One difficulty about the summer school was that it was catering for two rather distinct sets of people. There were those very new to BF some of them new to political work

altogether who wanted to explore basic ideas and have terminology and basic concepts looked at. The other group were of people who had been active in BF or other political groups for some time and wanted to use the school to debate and develop theoretical positions in a more detailed way — in fact to try to crack old nuts. Linked in with this division but not coincidental with it was a working class/middle class split. It was felt by some that the issue of class was being squeezed out by the issue of sex (gender) and a workshop was called for working class members only. Neither group's needs were fulfilled properly. Somehow in future summer schools we must overcome this difficulty while avoiding the pitfalls of two tier systems, consolidation of power to an inner caucus of experts, condescension towards beginners etc.

At times during the week I felt exhausted, confused and demoralised, full of frustration and yet too defensive to be able to articulate my

disagreements. These negative reactions were easily outweighed by feelings of joy and hopefulness — even euphoria on occasion. Judging from the amazing high spirits, warmth and delight at the last night's merry making I think lots of others felt the same.

FIRE FOR THE TIMES AHEAD

To live closely together for one week with people intensely committed to trying to find a socialist feminist way of living, trying to organise collectively and democratically for everything from the washing-up rota, to child care, to the chairing of the plenaries — this was the inspiring thing. It was trying now for a slice of the future: a socialist feminist island in a hostile sea, an injection of solidarity and determination to fire us for the coming year.

Lydia Hall (South London BF)

booknotes booknotes booknotes

Now that winter's approaching maybe you're thinking of spending any spare time that you might have with a good book. So if you've any suggestions or comments write in. Meanwhile here are some ideas — mostly books that came out in October (so I haven't read any of them yet) but they all look interesting.

WE SHALL RISE AGAIN is the final testament of Nora Connolly O'Brien. She participated in the republican and socialist movements from 1916 (she helped organise the Easter rising with her father James Connolly) to 1981 at which time she was campaigning for the H Block prisoners. It's published by Mosquito Press at £1.95. Two other new books are on the same struggle. TELL THEM EVERYTHING is the story of three months spent by Margeretta D'Arcy in Armagh Jail N. Ireland (Pluto, only £1.95). It describes the struggles of the women prisoners against their treatment by the British Government — locked up 23 hours a day in cells covered in excrement, urine and menstrual blood. THE PREVENTION OF TERRORISM ACT by the National Council for Civil Liberties (£1.75) is a review of the operation of the Act since its introduction; it shows how most people detained under the act are seldom charged or convicted.



Nora Connolly O'Brien - author of 'We Shall Rise Again'

THE UNHAPPY MARRIAGE OF MARXISM AND FEMINISM is an important collection of 15 articles written by women in the USA. It covers many viewpoints — both constructive ones putting a new theory on better foundations, showing the importance of race or gay politics; and critical ones suing for divorce. It's an important part of a debate that will continue on political theory. (Pluto £3.95). As background to the book articles in the latest REVOLUTIONARY SOCIALISM from Big Flame; and NEW LEFT REVIEW 128 may be useful. The Women's Press are publishing PORNOGRAPHY: MEN POSSESSING WOMEN (Ann Dworkin £4.75) and PORNOGRAPHY AND SILLENCE IS. Griffin £4.75). *****

COMRADE AND LOVER by Rosa Luxemburg puts questions of marxism and feminism in a different context. It's a selection of letters written in a period of fifteen years to Leo Jogiches, which emphasises conflicts in relationships and politics. For once the publishers blurb — a "classic" they say — looks unpretentious. For the purer light of Marxism there is M. Lowy's REVOLUTION WITHOUT FRONTIERS (NLB £4) which examines Trotsky's Permanent Revolution. If you want a book that is sympathetic to the possibility of Labour being a transitional force to Socialism then LABOUR AT THE CROSSROADS (M. Robertson £4.95) may be useful. It believes in a strategy that leads through Parliament and extra-parliamentary struggle to state capitalism, whoops what an error I mean to say socialism. Michael Foot has DEBTS OF HONOUR cheap at just £2.50 (Picador) *****

Lighter Reading you say! Well if you haven't seen it already there's Winifred Holtby's SOUTH RIDING (fontana £1.95), or two new novels by Margeret Kennedy, LADIES OF LYNDON and TOGETHER AND APART both by Virago Press at £2.95. Ann Oakley has a book based on conversations with sixty women becoming mothers, FROM HERE TO MATERNITY is £2.25 from Pelican. In contrast there's a personal account of life in a Citroen car factory in France after 1968 called ASSEMBLY LINE by R. Linhart (Calder £3.95)

Last but not least there's the GOOD TOY GUIDE 1982 published by Inter Action Inprint, in collaboration with the Toy Lending Library — it's a useful guide to 900 toys and costs £2.95.

All these books should be easily available - The Federation of Radical Booksellers can send you a list of good bookshops: F.R.B., 73 Walmgate, York. Or you can get them MAIL ORDER from Yor: Community Books! at the same address. Just send the price of the book plus 40 pence for P&P.

Terry Sheen