

HOW OFTEN A PAPER AND FOR WHOM?

Strangely enough the debate over how often our paper should be published has become identified with the debate over whether we are an organisation orientated to the masses or to the social movements. Clearly, this identification is not necessary since, for example, there is a clear difference of political orientation between 'Womens Voice' and 'Spare Rib' and yet both of them are monthly publications. The primary question is 'for whom is our paper written?' - that's what has to be looked at first. The argument that we should 'turn the paper to the masses' is put in its sharpest form in Tom Mann's motion where he writes 'BF's present pre-occupation with the left should take second place to agitation amongst the masses.....In order to intervene among the masses, the BF paper needs to alter its content and be published more frequently....' It doesn't seem to worry Mann that for the last 6 years, 'the masses' who we have 'turned to' time and time again have not answered our call - could it be that this populist, Maoist concept xx of 'the masses' is bullshit or that the average worker shopping on a Saturday at Tesco is not interested in buying 'Big Flame'. Of course, Mann could always argue that it would be possible to sell BF outside Tesco if it were a mass-orientated paper - I doubt it. In any case, BF members show no great enthusiasms to pub sell, street sell, factory gate sell the paper - and that's not the result of laziness but reflects their assessment of having done these things. Mann's motion wants to return us to a golden post-1968 age of massism, activism and hyper-militancy and he is not prepared to accept that we have all slowed down our pace of political activity, decided to look after our personal lives, made critiques (maybe self-interested) of external base-group interventions and are in no way prepared to be outside Tate's paper selling to the morning shift. References to 'turning to the class' and 'the masses' will always get a cheer at a BF conference - but they operate as a romantic substitute for political analysis.

The argument for a change of orientation for our paper is much more coherently put by French and McKenzie - they do not indulge in 'massism' but instead argue that the paper should de-emphasise its orientation to the social movements and the non-aligned left and instead prioritise 'involvement with the net-work of working class militants'. They say they want less in the paper on 'Beyond the Fragments' and the mens movement and presumably more coverage of industrial analysis, shop-floor organisation, political analysis etc. But in making this point, they seem to forget how articles for the paper get written. The majority of articles are written by BF members either as a request from the newspaper collective or as a commission by a commission. On the paper, we have been fully aware of the patchiness of our work-place coverage and we have repeatedly discussed this with the industrial commission who have now got a comrade co-ordinating workplace articles etc. There has never been any attempt on the paper to limit workplace coverage - on the contrary we have bent over backwards to put in articles from workplace militants some of whom have a habit of sending articles to arrive Sunday morning by RedStar.

LESS ON THE MOVEMENTS?

As to the claim that we should have less coverage in the paper of movement issues - I disagree. The interests and pre-occupations of independents and movement activists are just as important as those of workplace militants and in any case we do not have any evidence that workplace militants are not interested in these questions. We must steer clear of a tendency that exists on the revolutionary left to think that working class militants are only interested in wages and work conditions; for example, Pilger's TV programme on Cambodia has been a recent focus of discussion at workplaces (leading to collections etc) and it is unfortunate that no-one in BF thought it worthwhile to reply to the provocative and stimulating article on the boat-people that was in the paper a few months ago. The BF paper is and must remain a compromise and a balance which reflects the political space BF occupies - we are neither the SWP nor the socialist-feminist current. One final sociological/political point on this - BF recruits few workplace

militants (not for want of trying I might add) and BF is not growing in those towns where you find them (e.g. L'pool, Newcastle, Sheffield, Brum etc) on the other hand, the large majority who have recently joined BF have a movement past and our growth in London - a bastion of movement politics - has been very rapid over the last year. Now faced with these facts, it is possible to see this as some kind of accident and yet again demand 'a turn to the class'. In fact it is no accident - it reflects who is likely to be attracted to BF's politics. It is no use for those for whom this is painful to repress from their minds the fact that BF has been built and will be built by comrades who have been active and are active in the womans movement, the squatting movement, UTOM etc Of course, we must push for a working class orientation for our branches and our paper but this should not be taken to mean a denial of those issues (racism, sexism, adeism, collective living, childcare etc,) that brought many of us into revolutionary politics as individuals and BF as an organisation (check the grammar of that sentence).

SMALLER ORGANISATIONS DO IT!

French and McKenzie realise that an important objection to their argument for a fortnightly paper (FN) is that we might be too small an organisation to sustain it - to this their answer is that organisations smaller than BF sustain a weekly paper. But that's a terrible argument - since when have we modelled ourselves of the WSL or, for that matter, on the WRP which has a daily paper. The fact is that BF members have a very strong commitment to grass-roots work and part of this work involves them writing for and selling publications like 'Fightback', 'Fraud News', 'Troops Out', 'Spare Rib' etc, so in fact they already have publications to sell fortnightly. I hope that in the discussion on the paper at the conference, members make it clear how prepared they would be to write for and sell a FN - if there is a majority keen and willing to; that's a strong argument in favour of one.

A MOTOR OF GROWTH?

In the French/McKenzie document there is the arghument that the move to a more frequent paper will be the motor of BF's growth - they write "A leap forward' to a FN could provide us with the stimulus we need." - or it could kill us! My own hunch is that the FN is not the first priority for BF. That before we get into an FN, we need to build the organisation at branch level - and to get a network of functioning branches we need an accepted set of political priorities, an education programme etc. In any case, any discussion of how BF is to grow must start from the politics of BF and not be modelled on how other organisations have grown.

THE PRACTICAL IS POLITICAL

In some ways Franch and McKensie are right to dismiss the practical problems of an FN. But in some ways, these practical problems are also political. For instance, the apper at present is written, typed and laid-out by members without full timers. A FN would require at least a full time editor, a full time lay-outistx (+volunteers) and paid typing. And I suspect the appointment of these full-timers would lead to a more passive attitude of members to writing for the paper (as is the case in the SWP and IMG). In any case, minimextra expenditure would be £4500 a year (one full timer's wages + typing costs) of which only some will come back in extra sales revenue. And then it is a political choice as to whether this is the right way to spend the money - there are many other projects BF could spend it on.

SINCE THE LAST CONFERENCE

In the last 18 months, the paper has expanded from 12 to 16 pages - sales want down in 1978 because of drastic cut-backs in orders from L'pool and Manchester. They xx are now rising steadily (now at 2500, give or take a few returns) mainly because of a sharp increase in London sales. And contributions from members have increased in quantity and quality - e.g. the womens' commission and the industrial commission are now following the lead of the Irish and AFAR commissions and taking writing for the paper seriously. Donations and standing orders for the paper are on the up and I

would estimate the current deficit per copy to be not more than £70 which an increase in circulation to 3000 + £30 standing orders would cover (bring your notes to the conference). More than ever the production of the paper is a collective enterprise and it would be impossible without the heroic efforts of the comrades who come to Liverpool to lay it out and those from Liverpool and elsewhere who type and proof-read the copy - and also the hospitality of L'pool BF members who put us all up. Being editor has been a rich and rewarding experience for me - and I hope it is the same for whoever succeeds me.

CONCLUSION

A move to a FN within 6 months is not a correct political priority for BF - a FN should come after we have built up the local branches. At the same time we should make a determined effort to increase the circulation of BF (to do this I suspect requires the appointment of an efficient 'circulation manager' to firm up the distribution side of things) and we should try and get more independents to contribute to it. Also in informal discussions with non-aligned comrades we should see what support there is for an independent socialist weekly - a project much more likely to enable us to break out of the ghetto of the revolutionary left than increasing the frequency of our own paper.

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P.S. Frenche/McKenzie are wrong about the PDC not being able to handle a FN. They could since their runs are every two weeks - though at present they only sell 350 BF's (approx).