

## THE YOUTH QUESTION WHERE ARE WE NOW?

This article has been written partly in response to the letter sent to the cdes of Youth Liberation from the BF secretariat and partly to try and set about identifying what appear to be major stumbling blocks on this question.

It would be so easy for us now to fall back into hostilities on this question. Hopefully unlike past discussions on youth the time is ripe for us to look at this question in a down to earth and comradeley way.

I want to make my own criticisms of the Youth Liberation draft. I share some of the feelings of the secretariat letter, but like the youth liberation draft thought it a bit ambiguous (ie it could be misunderstood).

What i found healthy about the Youth Liberation drat was that it was written clearly and in a straight forward manner. Unlike the the secretariat ~~xxxxxxx~~ letter which in places was pretty vague and only touched on questions, rather than attempting to answer them. (eg..The criticisms of 'reproducing artificial language', obviously refereing to use of four letter words;).

My big worry now is that the question of youth will again become over polarised between those 'for unity with teachers / parents etc' and 'those against unity with parents/teachers etc'. There is no doubt that the youth leaflet as it stood in draft form could be misunderstood as being anti parent ,teacher etc. But as so often is the case on the revolutionary left we are in dnager of throwing baby out with the bath water.

### CHANGING SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS.

While ~~xx~~ such a position has to be criticised we must at the same time try and acknowledge the reasons for such a strong emphasis from youth to their relationships with teachers, parents, adults etc. For me it cannot be slagged off as being 'ultra leftists obsessed with divisions in the class'. What i have learnt from a working relationship with youth ~~x~~ in Brum, including many of the cdes who are in or around Youth liberation, is this. Any progressive movement which wants the support and active participation of youth must be willing to acknowledge their specific oppression (we have done this in BF); but it must also in practice show a sincere willingness to change oppressive social relationships now.

Now i have seen acknowledgements to this affect on paper but have yet to see ~~xxxx~~ this tackled in practice. And i'm not trying to use this as an excuse to condone leaflets that have been written by different people in the past (myself included) which could have been interpreted as anti adult/teacher /parent.

It would be so easy to fall into an argument about wether "all/most/many/ teachers are like little Hitlers". For us to discuss its relevance or not is pretty academic. I am more interested to find out wether BF teachers feel Childrens criticisms of teachers should be included in their leaflets (youth leaflets) or should these criticism be raised only in closed meetings, ~~xx~~ inter personal discussions, or internal documents?

### FOR WORKING CLASS UNITY

Perhaps one of the most mis used slogan on the revolutionary left. More often used in an oportunistic fasion to put down the demands of traditionally less powerfull sections of the working class (Women, Black people, Young people, Homosexuals, old folk etc).

Some critics of earlier youth leaflets pointed out how young people would need to united with other sections of the working class where ever possible.

There is no doubt that we did not give this question the emphasis it deserved, no doubt due to the fact that we were attempting to give closest attention to those areas of youths lives that were always avoided by revolutionaries, and which ~~xxxxxx~~ sensitive areas with often little hope of unity. (EG, the

questions of life in the family, conflict with parents; sexuality; life in school, relationships with teachers, to name but a few ).

We saw our role as trying to assist youth in building up a total critique of their situation in a capitalist society. That means both young women as well as men, for Black and white youth, for younger and older youth, at school, in the waged workplace, in the home, community, soccer game, discoteque, the lot.

OK, so its a mammoth task and one which will take an independent revolutionary youth movement to finally reconcile but that was and still is our main orientation. To look beyond the narrowly defined trotskyst conception of youth struggle, which until more recent mass youth unemployment was more or less reduced to the struggle of 'apprentices for trade union rights'.

Thats not to say we should snigger at these questions, far from it. Youth unemployment in particular is at astronomical levels and is obviously an important issue for any socialist youth movement. But its an easy way out, to reduce youth oppression to these questions. Look at most left papers and journals (BF included) and you will see the crude economism that simply ~~xxxxxxx~~ blames youth unemployment as the cause of everything from the rise of the Young National Front, to vandalism, Arson, Mugging... the lot. Sure, youth unemployment has been a contributory factor in these things. But it does not explain why youth of 13 or 14 march with the NF for example. I'll try and come back to this question later on.

Recent events have shown the basis for unity in action between youth and teachers and youth and parents. There have been large demonstrations in various cities and towns of teachers, parents and schoolstudents, usually in opposition to the cuts in public spending. There is no doubt that these actions deserve our praise and support. But in most cases they also need to be criticised. Despite the sincerity of the instigators of these actions, they very often (more often than not) take a very patronising form in the way they use schoolstudents, to increase the size of their demo but dont consider ~~xx~~ incorporating the demands of the pupils into the demands of the demonstration. And theres no doubt that in most cases youth would have lots to say about Quantity ("More education") arguments. So there is no doubt that on these 'united' demonstrations young people will be participating from a position of weakness rather than of strength. So we have to start thinking about how we work on such committees (as teachers and parents) how we can assist building the power of young people on these demonstrations. And it also means that socialist teachers start to seriously discuss the possibilities of assisting Schoolstudents in organising in the school. Some socialist teachers in Brum are looking into ways of getting an NUSS (National Union of School Students) branch off the ground in the school they work in.

I think there is now a considerable amount of support from within BF on both the importance of building an independent socialist youth movement and also a recognition of united action where ever possible. But, unfortunately we have still to tackle one very sensitive question. WHAT SHOULD OUR REACTION BE TO THE MANY ISSUES THAT YOUNG PEOPLE FEEL STRONGLY ABOUT BUT WHICH OFTEN SEEM TO CREATE ONLY HOSTILE REACTIONS FROM OTHER SECTIONS OF THE CLASS?

#### AFTER THE REVOLUTION?

This point isn't a 'side issue' alongside 'more important questions' it is central to the building of an independent revolutionary youth movement. It is easy to dismiss, or float around this question. To reduce very complex and antagonistic relationships within the class to a few glib lines about 'authoritarian relationships' or 'non antagonistic contradictions'. All i wish to say about the use of such language is that they don't adequately answer the real problems for youth. I dont want to ~~x~~ throw baby out with the bath water. Paul T in particular made some very excellent criticisms of past youth leaflets and documents. But it is a false argument to see things as a

an "Either", "Or" battle... "either" we fight for unity in action, "Or" we are obsessed with divisions in the class. ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~

Lets try and recognise the strengths of the youth liberation draft as well as its weaknesses. And lets incorporate the lessons into self criticism if we too are found wanting.

The secretariat letter failed to acknowledge and support the obvious feelings amongst revolutionary youth in Youth Liberation expressed in their draft leaflet, that they are not willing to sit back and accept their subordinate role in society. That socialism must also mean the fight to change oppressive social relationships, ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ and that ~~XXXXX~~ this must be done now (not after the revolution) in our theoretical discussions and in our mass practice. Without a commitment from BF as a whole on this point, dont be too suprised~~x~~ if those youth around the youth lib draft mis interpret ~~xxxx~~ the BF letter as an "evasion".

Youth Liberation's "Never mind the Bollocks" draft did however fall down in ~~xxxxxax~~ that it was open to misinterpretation, especially by teachers, as being anti them. It comprehended quite clearly their acute feelings of powerlessness (as young people) and was rightly critical of adult chauvanism and oppression. But it did not try to expãain the complex power relationships in the wider sense, (eg Why is it that Daddy or Mommy take out their own frustrations of powerlessness on their kids?... perhaps Mommy has given a rough time by daddy, perhaps Daddy has had the Boss onto him all day.) I have minor criticisms of the content of the youth Lib draft. Any major criticisms i have are more to do with what the draft didn't say than what it said. As i've tried to point out so far.

#### THE USE OF LANGUAGE

As i said earlier, i found some of the secretariat's criticisms pretty vague. In the next few chapters i want to try and pinpoint some of the areas which seem to cause us so much trouble and to suggest some ways and means of tackling these 'obstacles'.

Some were touched on in the secretariat letter, others weren't. A major criticism appeared to be the use of language by youth liberation.

"Some of the language smacked of attempts to re introduce in an artificial way the way youth are supposed to speak"  
Letter from Secretariat.

Some questions: What does the secretariat mean by "Supposed to speak"? and what are you trying to point out when you say "this does not go down well with young people who like most people tend to see the difference between the ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ spoken and written word"? Do you think youth always recognise this difference in a negative way, as you imply?

Sureley it is a positive attribute to express in written form (in leaflets papers, Journals, internal bulletins etc) what working class people say over a pint of beer, or a cup of tea.

Again it would be so easy to over polarise, this debate as one about whether or not to include swear words. Between blanket condemnation as i interpret the secretariats criticism and over usage, as i interpret the "Never mind the Bollocks" draft.

For those who see four letter words as 'artificial' then you are sadly out of touch with a mode of expression which as long as there is something to grumble about will always be used selectiveley. Myself, i dont really care how people wrap up ~~xxxxx~~ what they want to say as long as i get their meaning. I only wish our own cdes were more ~~xxx~~ selective in ~~using~~ ~~xxxxxxx~~ 'artificial' language like "Petit Bourgeois deviationist entrists" and

"ultra leftist revisionist contrists".

SOME MORE QUESTIONS: Why do Working class people in particular use four letter words? Do they have a place in our propeganda? What about possible sexist connotations/eg "Cunt"? Should our leaflets set out to be more clinically detached from emotion or should they be more emotional?

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#### NATIONAL UNION OF SCHOOL STUDENTS/NUSS.

The question of how revolutionaries should relate to NUSS is npt a new one. It has been the talking point of past as well as present activists. Although several youth contacts in Brum are beginning to use NUSS as a way of organising in schools i feel it is important for BF and those youth contacts we have to begin to establish a firmer criteria for working through NUSS. What are the strengths and weakness' for work& in NUSS? What should young people be fighting for within NUSS? (eg its position on Ireland and army recruitment, whether it could be used to launch effective anti recruitment work, sponsor the anti recruitment film etc). The common feeling amongst Brum contacts vis a vis NUSS is that it is "pretty tame" but usefull in that it can give some sort of national co ordination with other schoolstudents. Colchester, Sheffield, Liverpool and more recently Manchester BF have made contact or helped establish NUSS branches. More info from these branches, and their own views of NUSS would be invaluable.

#### GUERRILLA ACTIVITY. (Disruptive activities not armed insurrection ).

We should not be suprised given the absence of young people from any of the decision making processes connected to school, that young people often react in the absence of anything better, fight back with individual retaliation. Now this retaliation takes many forms as isn't always a conscious act, OR A REVOLUTIONARY ONE.

Again here is an area which needs closer examination. The tendency amongst many Anarchist groupings has been to glorify such methods of struggle from schoolkids, without recognising their weaknesses countered only by the blanket condemnation from the traditional marxist left. As many of us know guerilla activity has a long tradition in British schools. SHOULD WE SUPPORT SUCH ACTIVITY AT ALL? IF SO, UNDER WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES? EXACTLY WHAT SORT OF ACTIVITY WOULD WE OPPOSE/SUPPORT? Even NUSS which professes to be a "Non political" x"Responsible" school student body lists DISRUPTION as a last resort. So what sort of disruption would we support/initiate.

#### YOUTH AND FEMINISM

I'm listing these areas because they havn't really been worked out very thoroughly inside or outside BF, but most importantly because they are essential areas for any potential revolutionary socialist youth movement. Many cdes have been quick to state how even the term "Youth" conjures up impressions of men rather than women. I dont want to attempt to go into that point here, only to say that our activity needs to be alongside both young men and women incorporating to the full the revolutionary aspirations of the latter ( who generally get left out). But we are very weak on this question due to in part to the dominance of men cdes in youth activity in BF.

It would be a gross error to say that feminists havn't looked at the relationships between sexual and age divisions in the class. There has been a considerable amount of work done in the field of challenging sex roles in School books for example and in fighting for equal oportunities in training/ waged work etc for women school leavers. All this has to be supported and encouraged in the future

but little attempt has been made to actually involve young women themselves on these and other issues inside and outside school.

A very good discussion took place at a recent Birmingham project meeting to discuss youth. Women present were quick to draw out the many different ~~ways~~ problems faced by young women compared to young men. For example one woman present spoke of the way young women would see the many problems that arose in their own daily life as being proof of their own inadequacies rather than societies (or "the system"). Despite the weaknesses of male youths often individualistic, often reactionary responses to their "shit life", these responses were none the less more likely to be outwardgoing than for young women. Across the whole board you get male youth joining the NF, or smashing up a phone booth, beating up their girlfriend, their mate, joining left wing groups maybe, getting involved in the aggro at the football match etc etc etc....but so often expressed outwardly. Where as young women fighting against what the system has to offer them would blame themselves. This description was backed up by the frightening experience of one young Selly Oak Women (in her mid teens) who was not only active in the Independent Youth occupation (see Aug-BF paper) but has also been active in trying to set up a Womens group in another youth club. Out of the blue, we recently heard she was in hospital, recovering from an overdose (an attempted suicide). The pressures on Women to accept or reject so called "normal" sex roles appears to reach a peak at the age of ~~xxxxx~~ secondary school students; the induction of these ideas coming at an earlier age. Challenging societies idea that young women should be passive must also mean making sure that young women have a struggle role themselves, in the fight back.

These are just a few random thoughts, no doubt just the tip of another iceberg that Big Flame has to crack. Some suggestions: Could the womens commission set aside time to discuss the youth question, AND COULD such discussion be fully documented. It would also be helpful if the balance of male domination in youth activity was tilted the other way.

### SEXUALITY

The farthest left wing groups have gone on this question is to call for more and better info on contraception, abortion etc. ~~xxxxxx~~ The whole question has to be dealt with in more depth not just in abstract theoretical terms but starting from the problems of youth (their questions). Mary Whitehouse and a whole host of reactionaries have put this question on the agenda, why are they so worried? Should we support calls to lower (or even abolish) the age of consent? Why do older and younger people often have such conflicting views on this question? What are the specific problems for young women vis a vis oppressive sexual/Personal relationships? How do they conflict/or do they conflict with calls for lowering the age of consent? Why is the NF opposed to Pheodophillia? How do we relate to this question of Pheodophillia?

### BF PUBLICATIONS

Have we given the youth question adequate ~~x~~coverage in our publications? My own feeling is that we have been fairly weak in this department. Not only in reporting on going activity of youth (new NUSS branches, youth against fascism leaflets are 2 examples) but also in trying to use our publications as a forum for initiating discussion on youth. Why not for example ask cdes in and around 'Youth Liberation' to contribute a feature article for the paper on their own activities, views of the left, a new organisation etc? Lets not feel frightened or ashamed that maybe ~~x~~ in raising this question openly many mistakes will be made on All sides. ~~xxxxxxx~~ But lets stop hiding this debate away. Lets admit that we dont know all the answers. ~~xxxxxxx~~ That after a certain point of common agreement we still have a controversy on our hands.

The fact that this 'controversy' is taking place within BF and not in the discussion papers and meetings of ~~xxxx~~ most other left wing groups says a lot for one essential strength of BF's politics; the breadth of our analysis..the need for total alternatives.

It should be clear that these 'sensitive issues'(like some of those mentioned earlier in this document) are not self invented problems but a reflection of many underlying problems and questions affecting large sections of young people . BF can play a leading role in making sure the youth question in ALL ITs complexity is dragged into the light of day, starting in our publications. Also BF branches might like to consider inviting speakers from amongst youth contacts (eg Youth Liberation in Brum) to lead off discussions/meetings on this topic.

#### SOME FINAL POINTS

THE SECRETARIAT LETTER was out of touch with discussion and decisions taken at the previous youth meeting. In particular it was agreed that though a Youth anti fascist leaflet was an important move in itself it was also to be a way of sounding out support from other youth around the country and in Scotland in the idea of a future Revolutionary Youth paper run for youth by youth . And this accounts for some of the supposed 'mistakes' made in the Youth Lib draft. EG.....

+ Why the draft was written by youth at the previous meeting rather than simply using other anti fascist literature.

+ Why it attempted to deal also with general problems of youth and why it attempted to be more than simply a defensive response to what the NF have done...trying to pose general alternatives, or at least general criticisms of youths life under capitalism.

But as i've tried to point out earlier on, the secretariat ~~xxxxxxx~~ letter while recognising that the draft was open to mis interpretation ~~xxx~~ as a blanket anti adult position, failed to acknowledge or it seems, even recognise the strengths aparant within their ~~xxx~~ weakness. (ie the will to change existing social relationships starting now, not after the revolution).

It is also politically unsound to in one breath fail to give the YL draft even critical support while suggesting to the youth concerned they should consider giving uncritical support to an NUSS (National Union of School students) leaflet. No explanation of this position was put forward in the letter to Youth liberation which suggests it is not only YL who have to do some rethinking.

Now we have rightly acknowledged in BF the need to help build an independent revolutionary youth movement. No doubt building up NUSS branches and giving out their leaflets has been and will continue to be part of this process. But in no way can the former goal be simply reduced to the latter. As i've tried to point out earlier a much clearer understanding of the NUSS is needed inside BF. (Also support for the anti nazi league has been put forward as an alternative to the YL draft. Is this a guide for all BF ~~xx~~ anti fascist activity? If so how does it relate to other anti fascist bodies?)

Sure the secretariat letter raised some sound criticisms of the draft. But in my opinion there was a total~~x~~ failure to understand the right way to make those criticisms, bareing in mind this was ~~xxxxxxx~~ an honest attempt to investigate support for an independent rev youth movement. Again this is why it was drawn up by youth themselves and why we refrained from ~~xx~~ 'overseeing' their efforts. Also it was a draft leaflet (not a finished product) open to changes from those youth contacts in England and Scotland. In no way did the secretariat letter seem at all sensitive to the need for self organisation of youth, especially bareing in mind the problems of initial 'dependency' on 'better off' (not well off) sections of the left like us. We are not at the

stage of relating to a strong autonomous movement but of actually trying to help create one. Surely at this stage at least, this means acknowledging their right to make mistakes and also in the final analysis to determine amongst themselves what they print. But that does not mean simply sitting back and saying nothing if we disagree with things that are said or printed. But it should mean that while raising criticisms we do not impose strings on our solidarity and support (ie raising funds, giving out leaflets if desired). I think this is a more realistic and politically sound path to follow in relation to the YL draft. Why not print the leaflet that is eventually decided upon in the BF paper with comment from BF if necessary. This would also be an ideal way to initiate discussion on the need for an ~~xxx~~ independent revolutionary youth movement in our paper and publications generally.

On the contrary to follow the path of the secretariat letter will mean further isolation for those youth who are struggling to pull together the basis for such a movement. It will mean reducing the need for such a movement to the need for yet another youth annex of a left wing group, only this time BF. That is the only interpretation of such a patronising letter. It was ill timed and ill thought out and ended up showing clearly ~~xxx~~ that there is ample confusion within BF on the youth question.

BJ/Birmingham.