

WHAT HAS BIG FLAME GOT TO OFFER YOUTH IN LEEDS?

Criticisms from BF teachers in Leeds of the 'Youth' perspective put forward by the 'Youth' group, and embodied in TH's Leeds youth leaflet.

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Introduction

This short piece is the first shot in what should be a detailed debate throughout BF, and especially among those working with young people at schools, colleges, playgrounds and youth clubs. It is written with a certain amount of hostility and resentment, which we should explain before we get on to the political issues.

The leaflet had the BF contact address on, which happens to be where all three of us live. It has caused a furor, and the Education Dept is looking into it. Jeff has been told he might not even get teaching practice, let alone a job; and the question of suspending Max was raised by the Director of Education during the Bonfire Night Trial - his Principal has said he cannot support him 'next time', and he's already being accused of inciting the students to strike on 17th November. Jane is teaching part-time, and wants to go back to school teaching soon.

When Brian was told on the phone that our jobs were threatened, he said "Oh, tears are running down my face". We think that the leaflet's political line raises problems which cannot be dealt with by sarcasm. We also think it is inexcusable to be so unpleasant to comrades who are in such a difficult position.

The political line of the leaflet

Leaving aside the fact that the leaflet was not discussed by anyone - this is the fault more of the whole group than of the writer of the leaflet - we find it difficult to willingly sacrifice our jobs for it because we disagree with it in important ways.

But it should be absolutely clear that we are in full support of the Conference decision to work with youth, and in full agreement with Tony taking the initiative in Leeds. We thought that a lot of the leaflet was very good, but it has some weaknesses:

1) Parents: It shows no understanding of the complexity of the role of parents. It is not true that 'many' parents are like 'little Hitlers', and many parents who are authoritarian in the home struggle progressively at work. We can criticise this, but we'll get nowhere by such aggressive attacks on parents. We should show that we understand how the intolerable strain of personal life in capitalism makes people authoritarian. It is too easy for middle class people to attack working class authoritarianism.

Also, it should be obvious that parents will mediate the leaflet for a lot of kids (only two of the 20 odd calls have come from school students). Parents will, in one way or another, tell the kids what to think about the leaflet, and their hostility has to be, as far as possible, neutralised. References to Hitler and sex before 16 unnecessarily increase hostility, and may even divide parents further from their kids.

2) Teachers: Not all teachers are like the Beano cartoon, nor do they all think they are God. They too will mediate the leaflet, and while the hostility of shit teachers may do us good, we need the support of progressive teachers. One of the two calls from teachers was from a socialist, and she was offended by the leaflet. There are almost always one or two good teachers in a school (some of them are in BF!), and a call to a meeting for young people can be a real help to them - if it is done in the right way. They can help us considerably, and they are not won over by Beano cartoons.

Autonomy

We think it is ironic that the BF comrades who are demanding autonomy for the youth, and the exclusion of adults from meetings, are over 20 years old themselves. It is like men demanding autonomy for women, or whites demanding autonomy for blacks. We too think that youth must organise by themselves, for themselves - but we have to be very clear about the role of adults. BF does not have a radical feminist or black nationalist perspective. Your position smacks of separatism - and it was not adopted at conference.

Our argument is that youth must develop their autonomous power, and that adults can have a positive role to play. Teachers can help school students develop their power without taking over their struggles. So can parents, and young people in their twenties. Our own experience is that young people welcome this support, and are quite aware when adults are being helpful and when they are being domineering.

You, older people organising with youth, in practice take the position we've just outlined, but at the same time you appear to adopt a separatist and blanket anti-adult perspective. This will be seen by the youth as barefaced hypocrisy - and as politically unsound.

Our political work as teachers

It is the worst form of anarchist moralism to suggest, as Brian's sarcasm did, that we should not be concerned for our jobs. It is almost as absurd as the 'all teachers are foremen' position. We are quite prepared to stake our jobs for a correct political principle (Max said from the dock that he supported the Bonfire Night youth) but we are not prepared to be sacrificed to the politically unsound whims of ageing youths.

The struggle in education is an important part of the political work of all three of us. Apart from the day to day work, two of us have spent months on the Crisis in Education draft pamphlet, and this pamphlet is the basis of our contribution to the Radical Education Conference and in our local work. The Leeds youth leaflet will not go uncriticised by socialist teachers, particularly if threats are made to our jobs, since each time one of us goes down, the political position of all socialists in education is weakened. This work could not go on if we lost our jobs. And we don't accept any implication that this work is unimportant, or that we are simply 'foremen'. Nor do we minimise the importance of having a decent income. There is nothing wonderful about living on the dole (particularly if you have kids), nor is manual work 'more important' than teaching. It is a very distorted notion of 'purity' and of what it is to identify with the most oppressed that leads you into your position over youth. You should check it out occasionally with workers themselves - young and old.

Conclusion

We repeat: we think it is absolutely right to work with youth. IN no way do we accuse Tony of deliberately putting us in this position. But we do think there is a tendency in your political position to make all of us in BF, particularly those in education, vulnerable to severe attacks from both the left and the right. So we are arguing that you change course - that you clarify and correct your notion of autonomy, so that it does not antagonise all parents and all teachers. And you should be more sensitive to the position of comrades who are teachers. In BF we have to take far more responsibility for our actions, and that means behaving responsibly towards members of the organisation, and towards the working class as a whole. If the Leeds youth meeting ends in uproar, will you say that everyone in the meeting is wrong/reactionary/repressed?