

IN THE BEGINNING

We can't ignore anymore that life is grimmer and the class struggle is becoming sharper. The development of libertarian politics is getting faster to keep up with the hardening of class divisions. We're dissatisfied with groups muddling along individually, maybe carping about each other from time to time. Now we need to ask questions about what we're doing and what's going on in general, feeling some responsibility to each other for what we do.

As the situation hardens we tend to look to tighter national organization as the only answer, and dismiss too easily what we have learnt from our experience of past organization in the women's movement, squatters, claimants etc.

Through the newsletter there's been a lot of questioning of what 'libertarian politics' means, what its importance is for the future of working class struggle. So we've set about defining what we think are the common understandings, the questions we have about our practice and how we need to go on in the future.

(1)

Learning from working class struggles and our own struggles and developing our politics from that, rather than having fixed ideas about what the working class should be doing.

----- In fact, we haven't learnt enough from working class struggles. Our eyes are closed to the forms of resistance to capitalism that as yet have no political expression.

- women's fights for play space, closing roads
- petty theft, shoplifting
- rent arrears
- sabotage and vandalism, kids gangs.
- women in council playgroups joining N.A.L.G.O.
- the informal 'support' networks; friends helping each other fight down the social security, the social services, the rent office, the re-housing department, the local hospital and school.
- on estates, people getting together to drive off rent collectors, S.S. snoppers.
- putting the gas and electricity back on when its been cut off.

(2)

We want to organise in the way we want revolution to grow i.e. collective, anti-authoritarian organisation that develops out of working class struggles, rather than imposed on them. Because of this, we don't want to be the sort of leadership that people rely on for ~~awared~~ answers and initiatives. We've wanted a common political direction to develop out of collective action with working class people.

----- As a result, the importance of collective action and anti authoritarianism have come across very clearly, but to organise in a revolutionary way, we've had to be active, sometimes without being clear what we're up against, because we feel that people learn more from collective action than any amount of talking. Also it means that we have not been explicit about the need to build a working class movement which can take action as a working class offensive rather than particular people demanding their rights.

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We believe in organising as much from our own situation as from an objective analysis of where its important to organise. This has led to people organising around squatting, claiming and bringing kids up collectively.

----- In putting ourselves in the same situation as working class people and organising from our own situations, we've believed that we we're part of building up an autonomous working class organisation. In fact, these activities have been controlled by us because we've wanted out politics to be dominant in those struggles. We've remained

(b)

We've remained a 'hidden' leadership - our politics not open to challenge or criticism but still making the decisions.

This ideology of organising from our own situation only has also prevented us from intervening in other struggles as self-conscious revolutionaries. We were only able to intervene from the sectional organisations we had created as claimants or as squatters

(4) We attempt to understand the capitalist control of every area of our lives and find ways of organising to break through it. ie living collectively, bringing up kids collectively, feeling free about having homosexual relationships - from this we've discovered possibilities of change we never dreamt of and we know other people will learn from this as well. We've believed that we've made our politics clear through practice rather than giving full explanations ----- Sometimes this has resulted in the 'exemplar' politics of expecting people to change their own lives from seeing our alternatives; rather than seeing that we need to put over our critique of the family in working class struggles where people are in a position to respond as people have done eg with the miner's wives during the last miners strike, with the women on Tower Hill in the rent strike.

It's also shown a lack of understanding of the forces of capitalism. We can't smash the family simply by building alternatives to it. We can't destroy wage labour by staying out of work.

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We recognise the importance of those sections whose exploitation and oppression comes from deeper than just the work-place - women and immigrants in particular. That bringing these struggles into the mainstream of struggle not only widens class organisation and consciousness, but deepens and radicalises the struggle

----- To a certain extent, we've put over the struggles of women, squatters, claimants, low-paid workers as sectional. Again, this shows our superficial analysis of capitalism in that we haven't been able to make clear the common class interest between different sections. For example, the struggle of unsupported mothers and dockers have in common that they are both exploited through the division of labour between men and women - the docker is exploited just as much through not being the wage-earner for his family as through the actual work he does. The unsupported mother is exploited because - having no wage-earner in the family - she has to survive on starvation level because her work has no value. The unsupported mum can probably make a lot clearer to the docker about his own family than his wife or next door neighbour couldn't.

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We have a critique of the TUs and working class organisations that we see have been co-opted into the system - we see that these organisations are way behind the rank and file struggles in work and in the community and actually hold them back.

----- Many of us are violently anti-union but because it's still a very theoretical criticism, have found it hard to make clear our disagreements in practical situations. Through the dockers and miner strike, hospital strike, working at fords, different groups have had experience of being active with rank and file workers. But with the lack of ongoing rank and file organisation, it's difficult to see what the alternatives to TUs can be. We've tended to dismiss the TUs in situations where the workers themselves can't dismiss them because they have to confront them every day.

Also we can't act on an across the board analysis of TUs and shop stewards. For example - the shop stewards are the only leadership that exists in some places - the function shop stewards accept

This has changed our sense of what the socialist revolution is about and how we want to organise for it. It has deepened our understanding of what we are fighting to change in our own lives, as well as broadened our understanding of the oppressive character of capitalist society.

We dont at the moment feel that this understanding of personal politics contradicts in any way with the need to develop autonomous workers' struggles against capital, which we understand from the Italian movement. We dont see that this is a question of 'placing an emphasis' ' on personal politics vix a vis working class politics, or vice versa. This misses what we have learnt and how our politics has changed - how our understanding of the class struggle has deepened. As far as we are concerned there is one politics - our politics - the rejection of capitalism and capitalist society. When we reject the family and capitalist work in our own lives we also think that others want to do the same, and our experience helps us to understand why and how they do.

What led people to start long term intervention work around car factories ? It wasnt just that we thought they had a crucial role to play. It had something to do with our understanding of the process of work within car plants and what this doing to car workers - with the 'alienation' of the mass worker. So workers arent just demanding more money for the work they do, because they know they cant get any satisfaction from the work they are doing. People are no longer tied to work through the skills they have. This makes it possible for these workers to express a much deeper refusal of the system in all its aspects. They have few aspects within car plants for 'workers control'. They dont want to control their own exploitation - they just want to see the car plants destroyed because they experience the way they destroy human life. Of course the development of our politics - especially to the extent that libertarian politics has been enriched by the experience of the Italian movement - largely expresses the experience of these struggles. At the same time we understand how our own rejection of capitalist society has different routes in the student movement (though these have to be understood in terms of the changing role of universities within capitalism). We were brought up to accept the privileges of society, but recognised its moral and spiritual bankruptcy - we recognised the ways we had been repressed and damaged in our upbringing, brought up in competitive and individualistic situations. Our experience - whatever radical rejections of capitalist society we have been able to carry through - might mean we can be in touch with the real content of peoples' struggles against the present forms of capitalist organisation of society. In Italy the movement grew more directly out of working class struggle but it might be that our own political ideas - whatever complicated routes they have - allow us to understand the radical rejection of capitalist society and social democracy which we see taking place. A question for many of us is whether our ideas can reflect this consciousness in a developing way so that we might help give it expression.

Our own politics express the depths of rejection of capitalist society, as we ourselves have come to understand the role of the family, sexism and racism and begun to create forms of collective living to help us challenge and support each other in our rejection. Even if it is true that workers are increasingly rejecting work, we have to think about the senses in which they can be said to be rejecting 'capitalist society'. Though the fact that people arent just asking for more money, but are asking for a better life and more time for themselves, is a sign that the struggles going on are challenging the traditional lines of trade unionism. So in Fords people are fighting for 40 hours pay whether they work or not which directly challenges union (capitalist ?) ideas that people should only get paid for the work they have done. People need to live and want the money whether they have worked or not. This is part of what we mean by developing the autonomous struggle - the denial of the bosses right to choose the terms of our exploitation. The growing awareness that the factory is organised against the workers and that the workers dont benefit when the firms do well - only means more intensive work.

WHY DID WE WANT TO BECOME A POLITICAL GROUP ?

The answer to this question is probably best expressed by talking about some of the things people in E. London were involved in before - and the need we felt as a result of these experiences to become part of a general group. We thought it was better to do this, rather than talk about everything we've done and everything we are thinking of doing.

Some of the Ford group's reasons were talked about in the last newsletter - how hard it was to have general political discussions within a group that was only working around the factory - how some of us felt we were stagnating, starved of general political development, and were failing to express the totality of our politics in the work we were doing with Ford workers. How we needed a 'support group' which shared our politics. How militants that we were beginning to know at Fords needed the chance to talk about and become involved in politics outside their own situation. How there was a possibility of working with Ford workers wives in Dagenham; we need a context in which we could talk that out as a priority etc etc..

The Bow School Campaign A few of us were intensively involved in this campaign from its inception for a period of 6 months to its (temporary?) demise. We were seen in the campaign as individuals, as teachers, students, as 'nice people', as hotheads or hard workers or mediators - sometimes even as socialist individuals. We had no context in which we could work out the politics we were bringing to that situation, so we were often confused on a number of levels. We were taken up with the weekly developments and didn't have to explain what we were doing to a larger group. This might have made us think more about our involvements and made us clearer about the kinds of things we could do in the situation.

The campaign was regarded as a complete loser from the beginning. This has advantages because it meant that local councillors and CP couldn't make any capital out of it. The parents had to do everything themselves and were told they were fighting a hopeless campaign. The campaign regularly involved about 30-50 of the most active and militant parents. The weekly meetings were very open. This was easier to maintain because no councillors or teachers would really identify themselves with it. (originally some IS people were involved as part of a group called 'people concerned with better education in East London' - they were all for having a committee. People got pissed off with them, especially when they did a lot of the talking at the meetings, but did little of the work. They assumed it would be a good idea for them to be the 'officers' - it was partly in reaction to this we retained an open and democratic campaign)

Only by going to the labour party headquarters did people realise how condescending and useless it was to work through the labour party. This experience was more important than anything we could have said. Though for some parents, this meant we had to 'go to the top' and appeal to Mrs Thatcher. It was through the experience of the campaign that the more militant parents felt pissed off with the 'self-appointed' leaders - the parents who were more 'in' with the school and more convinced that it was important to 'put a good case' to Mrs Thatcher. This came to some kind of crunch when the kids wanted to organise some kind of strike in the school. The more militant parents went along to give their support, while other stayed away and even informed the school of what was planned.

Often we who were working in the campaign, while sympathising with the more militant parents, got trapped into playing a mediating role, feeling we had to 'hold the campaign together'. We were afraid of taking sides too openly. Because we were not part of a political group we lost sight of who we were as revolutionaries - 'saving the school' became all important, especially as we came to feel what this meant to parents - more important than developing the contradictions of the situation. We were diffident about pushing some direct actions, because it was parents and kids who would 'suffer the consequences'. Our lack of clarity and analysis about the kinds of demands and actions that could best develop the struggle. We knew the East End was under attack as people are being pushed out

But we were confused about what it means to 'save' this school, with its authoritarianism, its shitty buildings etc, beyond the idea that the people of Bow wanted their own school and didn't see why it should go because the ILEA said so. We were surprised that the kids were ready to fight for it and by their attachment to it. This had something to do with it being a small school, where kids knew each other.

As part of a group we could have been making our total perspective clearer from the start. People would have challenged us more readily and we would have said more about who we were - why should kids need to slog through this shit to get the kinds of jobs they get under capitalism? - What are these schools for - our needs or the bosses? etc) We could talk more confidently about the attack on the working class. We could have been a lot clearer about our support of the most militant parents and the kids and ~~more~~ put more effort into their struggle (though it is always going to be difficult to work with parents and kids at the same time?). We tended to think we had to support reformism where it was voted on - we'd have had a better basis for backing out of it if we had explained more clearly what we were doing in the campaign. This is easier if our involvement in the campaign was a part of a more general involvement in the politics of the area. We could have more confidently challenged the idea of 'asking' the ILEA for what we wanted - and posed the question of taking it - eg by occupying the school during the holidays.

Whether the campaign 'failed' or 'succeeded' in terms of keeping the school open was not the question - rather the question is the ability of the people in the campaign to carry out organising together and to develop their autonomous struggle - to refuse to be schooled where and how they tell us and then to take the campaign beyond the school. It was hard to build upon the campaign and to generalise it because people saw us as 'interested in education' - so wouldn't naturally think of contacting us in other struggles. If we had presented ourselves as more of a political grouping, then we would have been more able to develop the relationships we had built up. A group that more militant parents may have wanted to come to could have helped parents and kids talk things out - to deepen their own understanding of the situation, to help them see the struggle in all its fronts and in a historical context and help them spread the struggle to other areas (this was only done on a personal basis by bringing people from the Schools campaign to the Roplar Hospital Campaign). It wasn't so clear how this all might have happened - what is clear is something about the politics of 'campaigns'. So easily you get drawn into the groupings and it becomes hard to ask more general questions. So easily you slip into accepting reformism because this is what the 'majority' tend to be thinking in terms of. It becomes hard to work and develop with those parents who felt the need for something different, because there is no easy context to get together.

KLTHE BACKYARD PRESS

The experience of running the East End Backyard Press has been similar. The press has operated for the past year as a 'community press' printing whatever came in from the broad left in the area. The people working on the press were kept too busy to make their own consistent initiatives, and thus very much reflected in what was printed the prevailing political power structures in the East End (church groups, community workers, CP etc) Now we want to make the press as far as possible our own organ as a group. This doesn't mean we won't print material other than our own - but we will only print stuff where we have a clear political relationship between ourselves and the people we are working with.

EEDAG

Another example: we have been going along to meetings of the East End Dockland Action Group, trying to pose a consistent alternative to the kind of reformist politics that dominated the meetings - and thereby gaining the respect of a number of working class people there. We put out an alternative leaflet at a demonstration to mark the opening of t

the new Tower Hotel at St. Catherine's Dock. Our existence as a separate group enables us to be much clearer about our involvement - or not - in EEDAG's activities, and the potential of actually providing an alternative reference point for actions if EEDAG continues to fail to deliver the goods. (We don't have to be tarred with the same brush)

These examples point to some of the reasons for working as a political group in the East End. There are others too - the need to collectivise theoretical work, decisions about publication etc, which had become individual projects (often remote from the needs of struggle)

We see becoming a general group as no more than opening out the problem of organisation for us - not as "solving" it. We have no 'programme' for our development - as the Party or anything else. The Ford group in London - as in Liverpool - has yet to deal with the problem of developing an adequate organisation within the Ford factory, that can confront the company beyond the union structure. We don't know how that organisation will develop or how East London BF will come to relate to it. Nor do we know what kind of structures can be developed in the communities to fight, say, on the housing front, that go beyond tenants associations. We are just beginning.

WHY CALL OURSELVES BIG FLAME?

We think we know and share a lot of the politics of BF Liverpool - whether we do or not our actual relationship will have to be discussed soon and worked out in practice. We certainly don't think of ourselves as a 'branch' of BF, though the fact that BF is the largest group in the Network has certainly influenced us. We suspect that our different history from BF (through the Womens Movt. Claiming, squatting as against through IS.) has led to a slightly different politics. That will have to be worked out - as it will with all other Newsletter groups - in practice.

Partly the decision was a pragmatic one: the Ford group already existed as a BF group and it would be a drag to change the name. There is also the analysis which suggests a high degree of correspondence between the economies of Merseyside and Thameside (oil, dock cars, sugar, etc) and thus potential of a number of other joint BF projects. On the other hand, we are also a London group. There is also a good case for being 'We Want Everything' in East London.

One thing to be clear about : there is no BF takeover. There is no plan to impose mechanistic ideas of national organisation on anyone. STOP PRESS

In East London, building workers are crucial to any fight against speculation. They are under severe attack from the lump at the moment, and soon they will feel the effects of 11½% mortgage rates and 15% bank loans. East London building workers were highly organised during the 1972 strike and active on flying pickets. We think that it's important to work with building workers round the Shresbury 24 defence at the moment because the defence committee could become an effective rank and file organisation committed to the idea of effective picketing. Such organisation will be needed to act together this winter against Carr's special industrial police when the going gets tough this winter.