

East London in the 70s

– One woman's view

East London in the 70s – an area of working class housing and industry that stretched from Stamford Hill to Dagenham. A major power-house of imperialist capitalist production and distribution for the last 200 years.

It was a heady mix of the swinging sixties, the height of post-war affluence and the power of the organised working class. Twenty years of post-war industrial expansion still fuelled and financed by the colonies. East London was still the centre of British docking activity and great and small manufacturing factories – Fords Dagenham, Lesneys, Tate & Lyle. Powerful trade unions: the TGWU in the docks, the AUEW and GMB in the factories, UCATT on the construction sites, led by powerful Communist Party figures such as Jack Jones and Jack Dash. Working class solidarity and consciousness was high and highly organised – and on the whole only represented the interests of white, male, skilled workers. Women and black immigrants didn't get a look in.

In the midst of the powerful trade unions the Communist Party had situated itself in positions of power and influence – also in the tenants' and community organisations of the East End. Housing conditions were inadequate: the vast pre- and post-war estates spread across Bethnal Green, Poplar and Tower Hamlets, giving rise to powerful tenants associations. These housing estates, despite being built by local authorities often with a socialist welfare state ideology of providing the best possible housing environment to working-class people, still signified poor quality and high rents. The aftermath of the war and the post-war boom years also meant that housing in London was in a generally bad state, with vast swathes of derelict and sub-standard private housing and racketeer private landlords.

During the 70s the increases in rents charged by both council and private housing was a major focus of struggles – led by the same white male leadership as led the trade unions. They didn't include the issues of access to housing for women and immigrants, domestic labour and abuse, childcare and health, that the new political movements of the 70s raised. Because of its white male-dominated and authoritarian politics the 'old' left of the Communist and Labour Parties didn't make

connections aimed at empowering struggles and people and organisations. They sought to build and retain their own power as a white male skilled worker stronghold, which meant that they always sold out the rest of the people who constituted the workforce.

As a group of political activists we arrived into this context in east London in the early 1970s. We came via different routes, both personal and political. About 15 of us were excited and inspired to form a group called 'East London Big Flame'. Big Flame Liverpool already existed, and we were impressed by their seriousness, determination and impact in the struggles in Fords Halewood factory and Tower Hill rent strike. In east London we found ourselves in that strange and heady conjunction of different stages and cultures of capitalist development. We were consciously developing new and creative models of working, living and organising politically in rebellion against both outdated and new models of capitalist development – and the institutions of the 'old Left'.

We knew de-industrialisation was starting its inexorable process, we knew the centres of capitalist production were about to move from the industrial powerhouse of east London to the newly developing centres of the far east; we knew the traditional trade union movement was on the cusp of losing its stronghold on power. We understood our subjective experience as women, immigrants, workers, outsiders of one sort or another, in this context of change. We were aware of the beginning of increased automation (as we called it – we didn't have a clue about the digital age about to arrive), and assumed our struggle would be about gaining increased leisure time for workers. A priority was to demand and enable men to take shared responsibility for domestic labour – and challenge sexism and racism.

East London Big Flame saw itself as doing precisely this, building on the New Left theories of the feminist movement and organisations like Solidarity (the UK one), the Libertarian Socialist network, Lotta Continua; and bringing these into 'the struggle'. We saw ourselves as building an awareness drawn from everyday activism, building new models of how to organise ourselves, and at the same time re-interpreting in relation to our own experience the political theory of Marx, of Gramsci, of Maria Rosa della Costa, Rosa Luxembourgh, Franz Fanon, Raoul Vaneigem, Wilhelm Reich.

We were there during the 1972 dock strike against containerisation; the 3-day week and picket lines run by the National Union of Miners in 1972. We took our Claimants' Union table down to the dockland picket lines to advise strikers and their families on how to claim benefits, and were told to 'piss off' by the TU leaders. We were aiming to build links between the employed and the unemployed. We produced the 'Un-supported Mothers' Handbook' advising single women on their right to have children, get decent housing and benefits – and succeeded in achieving good housing for many single mothers. We took part in the picket lines at Grunwick's in 1977, supporting the immigrant women workers' right to join a trade union. We housed the miners who came to join them on the picket line. We literally fought the National Front on the streets of east London, and supported Bengali families by helping them squat in deserted blocks of flats and streets of houses around Bethnal Green. All these were actions of the time that many others were initiating and leading – we saw Big Flame as providing a focus for 'linking up' of these struggles – not of leadership, but more as providing a space.

The many struggles and initiatives we were involved in are documented on the rest of this website.

Looking back, I would say we are shocked at the extraordinary scale and success of capitalist expansion and development in the East End – and the co-optation of many of our demands for equality and inclusion. Were we naïve?

On the one hand, we were middle-class university-educated products of decades of capitalist expansion and boom after the Second World War. Many of us came from families of immigrant backgrounds: Ireland, Eastern Europe, Portugal, Greece... families who had been able to work hard and prosper in the post-war affluence of 'Great Britain'. Our ideology and motivation was a product of the New Left critique of Communist Party authoritarianism, as well drawing from feminism and the black and gay rights movements in the USA., from the new therapeutic ideas emanating from California – and assuredly from 'swinging London' – the joie-de-vivre of the music, the clothes, the drugs and rock'n'roll culture, the sexual freedom which were also features of capitalist boom-time.

In East London Big Flame we were a product of all these things, but almost certainly not of the working class struggles and history that epitomised the organised working class in east London in that period.

Our politics was about creating new alternatives to the divisions incorporated by capitalism and perpetuated by what we saw as a stultified and Communist-Party-dominated trade union movement, and the Labour Party.

We saw the traditional Marxist-Leninist Left as equally blinkered by a hierarchy of white, male, middle-class elitist central committee leaderships. Under the influence of feminist politics we aimed to explore new forms of de-centralised organisation, which we described as 'autonomous'. Particularly the women in the group demanded the right to be self-directing and not under the steerage of a central committee. We understood how exploitation is carried out in all areas of our lives, and hence understood the importance of housing, child care, health, sexuality, food and all the extra labour of reproducing capital that is carried out in the home. We understood these parts of our lives as a focus for new demands and creative strategies that could deepen our emotional connections with each other and strengthen working-class solidarity. For example, those of us in the Lesneys women's group raised issues of women's safety, health, racism, and the burden of unpaid domestic labour, in the trade union meetings about equal pay. As well as working in local factories and workplaces, we organised squatting, housing many homeless families and single people; we organised a children's centre and girls' club; a food co-op; training women in manual skills and trades; and the therapy and men's group.

Our activity and output during that period was extraordinary. How did we ever find the time and energy to produce all those pamphlets, posters, leaflets, occupations, demonstrations, meetings? We must have lived and breathed politics. We were certainly part of a web of networks that were both national and international in scope, and we certainly believed that we were part of a powerful movement for transformation of society towards some kind of socialist feminist utopian one. We travelled to Italy to work with Lotta Continua; to Spain and Germany where we developed life-long connections with 'comrades'; Portugal during the revolution; Latin America; Chile and Cuba; the USA. Those networks are still resonant in our relationships today, and are expressed in our

continuing commitment to and excitement about the political movements for revolutionary change today, like in Egypt and the women's struggles in India.

The question is, what about our working class comrades from the East End, where are they now? At the time I remember being told by women I worked with in the factory that I would and should go back to my middle class roots. It is almost certain that most of us have gone into professional well-paid careers and are not in touch with any of our former east London 'born-and-bred' comrades. The one long-lasting thing I remember achieving is a big community centre, on the Lincoln Estate in Bow, which runs clubs for local girls. The East End has changed out of all recognition with the closure of the docks and the re-creation of Docklands as Canary Wharf and the prime real estate opportunity for the glittering palaces of the banks of the world. London is the global financial power house for the nation, with new high speed rail lines reinforcing its dominance over the regions.

The working classes are being pushed further out to the periphery, and the negotiations are conducted under the banners of carefully constructed neo-liberal terms like 'inclusion', 'diversity', 'stakeholder', 'mixed and sustainable communities'. Workers are predominantly service workers for the glittering palaces, with centres of manufacturing production pushed out to the developing countries. Capitalism has expanded and profited unabated, but we are still here, and younger people are waking up to politics again. We have confidence in new developments like the 'Unite' community trade union, the UK Uncut and Occupy movements, the anti-war movement, the re-discovered feminist awareness amongst young women. The political movements today are still predominantly single-issue focused, and don't seem to have the coherence of the understanding that we had of how exploitation permeates all areas of our lives. But perhaps they do, and it is just some of us 'old fogies' who think it might be necessary to put all these struggles into a centrally focused organisation like Big Flame? May the process, discussions and 'joy in struggle' continue and flourish!