



# THE PEOPLE'S COOP

## Something about the area

The way we organize in East Lodon is based very much on our understanding of the area we are working in, but on the whole we tend to take this understanding for granted, forgetting that other people won't necessarily know what the East End is like.

Well, until around the time of the war, the main industry in this part of East London (roughly the same area as the borough of Tower Hamlets) was the docks, and a number of smallish 'family businesses' like Tate and Lyle's, Charrington's, Bryant and May's. The borough was one of appallingly bad housing conditions, narrow streets of decaying slums and grim pre-war tenement blocks. The level of militancy and class consciousness was traditionally high, both in the workplace and in the community. In fact it was partly the militancy of the dockers which forced the employers to gradually close down the docks, and to cut the labour force, transferring work to the container terminals further down the river. With the closedown of the docks and the Labour councils' policy of total slum clearance and rebuilding after wartime bombing, the character of the East End was radically changed, and old patterns of militant organisation broken up. This shouldn't be seen so much as a capitalist conspiracy to break up pockets of working class militancy as an attempt to recoup and contain struggles for higher wages and decent homes.

Anyway, although the character of the East End was transformed, people reshuffled into anonymous new estates or out into the suburbs, forced to travel further away to work (especially to the industrial estates growing up eastwards along the river through Barking and Dagenham etc.) a lot of the old sense of community and militancy has survived. The organizations of the labour movement have been largely responsible for this survival, the Labour and Communist parties, and the trades unions. Maybe for this reason they still tend to dominate the political life of the area, both in workplaces and in communities, for instance the 1968 rent strikes, and more recent battles against the redevelopment proposals for dockland. But much of the revolt is at a more basic level, partly mediated through labourist and reformist bodies, partly in conflict with them. For example there are still whole streets and blocks where everyone knows exactly when the electricity-meter man is coming, and where a whole community will turn out to prevent an eviction. And more recently there has been a groundswell of self-organisation of the thousands of homeless people in the area, which is forcing a grudging recognition from the traditional labour movement.

We might say, then, that there exist three levels of organisation in the East end, which at present co-exist more or less easily, and between which a whole network of political relationships is already established. There are those parts of the old labour movement which have more or less carried over since the war - the Labour Party, C.P., local branches of trades unions, and tenants associations. Then there are the newer organisations, sponsored or encouraged indirectly by the state & through social work agencies - official squatters associations, CDPs, adventure playgrounds and youthclubs, law centres etc. Lastly, always partly mediated by these labourist and social work agencies, and partly pushing them further and further to the left, there are the struggles of the working class for higher wages, decent homes, room for the kids to play, welfare facilities and benefits, some kind of communal cultural life.

For us as revolutionary women working in this area, it has been essential for us to carve out a position for ourselves in this existing structure of political relationships. Until this happened, we were always 'out in the cold', and we would learn about important struggles happening just a few streets away through the jaundiced reports in the local paper. We needed a position from which we could intervene and be 'on the grapevine' of local militancy. The food coop, because everyone is interested in it, has put us in touch with a lot of the political life of the area, and has sometimes enabled us to make links between different struggles.

Organising with women around kids, around shopping, and around housing has enabled us to be integrated into the daily life and the daily struggles of the area, to be a part of existing networks, and to be able to understand and use those networks. It has been important for us to become one of the recognized political forces working in the area.

## EAST LONDON: THE LINCOLN ESTATE FOOD CO-OP

The food co-op has been going for nine months, and we thought it was time we tried to write some notes on our experiences working in it. Different sections have been written by different members of the group, past and present.

### History and Development

Just before Christmas '73 was a time when everyone was talking about rising prices and it was politically a very sore point. All the talk in bus queues was about how to make ends meet and all the political groups took up the question as a soft option on how to get in touch with women. We were no exception and put out a leaflet in our local market about rising prices and profits. We had recently moved to the East End of London and were searching for some way to relate to housing estates as institutions where women are used to house, clean, feed and reproduce the working class for capital, and for some way of subverting this factory-like process.

The leaflet gave statistics comparing the effects of entry in the EEC and the world commodity shortage, which meant rising prices, with the increase in productivity and speculation, which meant rising profits for capitalists. We also described how other women had got together to organise pickets and boycotts, and suggested solidarity with everyone along the chain of food production and consumption; factory workers, shopworkers, housewives, shoplifters. It was clumsy, not because the connections were false, but because we had no way of making that solidarity real. After a few Saturdays in the market, we called an open meeting, and, of course, nobody came.

Demobilised, things were quiet over Christmas. Thinking it over, we decided to abandon the model of a "campaign" over ~~rising~~ prices, whether local or national, and recognised that this was not a way to start organising with women in the area. We decided to base our activity on one single estate where we already knew people through the Shrewsbury 24 Defence Group and the Claimants' Union. In spite ~~xxxxxx~~ of our reservations about the "reformist" nature of food co-ops, we decided to start one, drawing on three political histories:

- 1) A local East London "health food" co-op, which bought brown rice, vegetables, etc. The social relationships that existed around this collective shopping were good, but the kind of ~~x~~ food that was bought and the inaccessible place it was held in made it closed to most working class people. It mostly involved students and squatters.
- 2) The red markets in ~~the~~ Italy, which were the model for the Red Spot Market started by comrades in West London. The Red Spot Market encouraged us by showing the feasibility of doing a food co-op with working class women, but we were less concerned with establishing ~~x~~ a public "presence" and more concerned with getting a number of women actively involved in running it:— even ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ if it meant that we made fewer 'political' points at first.
- 3) A theory that in any practice, people should have some material gain for ~~what~~ they do, and not expect people to be militant for either bureaucratic (i.e. more talk than action) or idealistic reasons. The idea was that food would be actually cheaper bought collectively and so women would be involved who wouldn't come into a 'political' ~~xxx~~ campaign against rising prices. We recognize the importance of starting where people are at, and organising around their immediate needs as they experience them from day to day under capitalism.

Here's what we did:

\*\*\*\*\* Together with one of the women we knew, who is the wife of a CP militant, we wrote a short leaflet and distributed it on the estate. At the first meeting there were only the ~~x~~ women we knew and some friends of theirs. We began the food co-op by having an open session on the green at the bottom of the flats, selling off goods we'd bought

at cost price. The situation was great, lots of women came out to see what was going on and to buy. It was a sunny day, with kids playing on the grass. The local shopkeeper, who lives on the estate, also came out, beside herself with frustration and anger, and made a splendid intervention. It all came out of her mouth, better than any leaflet could ever say, that she was really angry and frightened because women were organising together and she would no longer be able to make money out of other people's needs.

The food co-op built up gradually over the summer, every other Saturday we would sell off food bought in bulk on the green. We had meetings to arrange it, held in different women's flats the Wednesday beforehand, and it was a whole process of getting to know women on the estate and then getting to know each other. From the start, it was organised as collectively as possible. As we became more of a group, and recognised that it was friendships and not selling on the green that was drawing more people into the co-op, we concentrated more on getting our own orders and sold on the ~~green~~ green only to get rid of surplus. Different women came to the meetings depending on which tower block it was held in, and that was how we realised just how segregated the estates are. Even now, there's one whole side of the estate that we hardly ever meet and when we once moved the selling from one green space to another, a whole lot of women came by who'd never heard of us before although the food co-op had been running for weeks.

At this point, it might be useful to give a short description and history of the estate. It houses about 2,000 families, mostly in lowrise but with two tower blocks. There are lawns around the tower blocks but they're very small; there used to be an adventure playground but that has been allowed to run ~~derelict~~ derelict; other facilities include a small swing park, a playgroup with a long waiting list, and a youth club which some parents on the estate fought to set up. Some of the women involved in the food co-op were involved in setting it up. There are two expensive corner shops on the estate, and a small row of shops nearby but no laundrette. Most women walk 1½ miles to one of the street markets to do their shopping.

The estate was involved in the 1969 G.I.C. rent strike against an increase in rent, but like all the others it had petered out in a legal wrangle as to whether the rent increases were allowable by law. This had affected people's experience in two important ways. One was the tenants' committee, which was distrusted because it had been responsible for collecting the contributions towards the legal expenses, and was blamed for the privatized way in which this was done; so that finally no-one knew who had paid the increases and who was still on a rent strike. The community centre had been taken over by ~~the~~ the remnants of this tenants' committee, and so was effectively out of everyone's control. It's run by a clique of friends, the tenants have to pay to use the hall for socials, and the tenants' committee wouldn't hear of us using the hall for a food co-op. The second effect was that the women were very pessimistic about people supporting each other. Having had one bad ~~experience~~ experience of collective action ~~breaking~~ breaking down, they didn't want to go through that again. You could say, though, that that kind of distrust is an experience that capitalism reproduces every day, and always has to be broken down, but this was the particular history that women on the estate referred to.

The estate was also seen as a pretty dumpy estate, particularly the high-rise parts; people didn't want to stay too long there, didn't want to fight ~~around~~ around it but just move on, so with the high turnover people didn't get to know each other too well.

So our initial role was an organisational one, taking overall responsibility for getting the food co-op together, doing a lot of the running around in cars, checking out on the legal situation. It was also important that we took the initiative. The ~~new~~ women on the estate thought it was a good idea, but were worried about committing themselves to something when they'd have to live with it afterwards. They were afraid of being made to look silly and never being able to get away from it. In fact, when the shopkeeper came out and began shooting her mouth off, it was one of the women on the estate,

who's well known for her militancy, who was picked out and slagged off as the troublemaker and slagged off at the local bingo session.

~~As the meetings continued over the summer we have held the co-op together with by physically (by driving the driving) and taking responsibility for the orders) and conscious~~

As the meetings have continued over the summer, we have held the food co-op together by doing the driving, by taking responsibility for the orders, by making sure that the next meeting was fixed up and that someone was doing all the jobs, by initiating social activities, and by maintaining a constant presence at times when the co-op looked like being split up by personal antipathies, jealousies etc.

As we always had problems getting a large enough float to buy in bulk, we organised a jumble sale. This was something of a turning point, because ~~this~~ it was mainly organised by the women on the ~~xx~~ estate who were far more expert than we were at jumble sales.

After the summer period, we had stopped selling on the green altogether, and concentrated on improving the practical and collective ~~x~~ aspects of the co-op (we deal with this in detail later.) One of the main practical problems was having a place to distribute and store food - for some time we had felt dissatisfied with using people's flats each week - humping sacks of potatoes and boxes of tinned peaches on and off lifts to the 17th floor becomes the kind of martyrdom we can all do without. The obvious place to use would have been the community hall, but this would have involved a real fight with the so-called tenants' committee. This was one of the ways in which we hoped that the co-op could develop into a more confrontational group, but we didn't feel strong enough because there was a vicious circle - in order to fight for the hall we needed more members, but we couldn't expand the co-op without first having bigger premises. So we began tentative negotiations for a G.L.C. short life shop front, but in the meantime a woman joined the co-op who lived in a converted shop. This made running the food co-op much easier for everyone involved as there was less carrying and we can leave stock there; but it involved all of us in a certain amount of confrontation with her husband, and it still hasn't solved the problem of finding a place which ~~x~~ is large enough for a bigger food co-op.

There have been a number of off-shoots from the food co-op: some women have become involved in the women's self-help therapy group, which started at our now-defunct local women's centre; some have become involved in the small co-operative playgroup which we have been running for over a year, in a squatted house near where we live, about a mile from the estate. All the women seem to see the social side of the co-op as important, which means both the discussions we have at the meetings and doing things together outside the food co-op. We have been to see plays at the local left-wing theatre, and to see "Coup pour Coup". There is a network of parties, ~~xxx~~ women's dart team matches, Shresbury socials, etc. Recently we have been trying to make links between women in the food co-op and people involved in a mass squat of homeless local families in an empty council block opposite the food co-op estate. This has proved more difficult than we thought, for reasons we'll go into later.

and on the driving trips

Several people have ~~xxx~~ come along to meetings to see how the food co-op is run' in this way we have helped some students in Deptford and a group of working class women we knew in Camden to set up food co-ops similar to ours. There has been a preliminary meeting about setting up a food co-op on the Isle of Dogs, and ever since a woman in the food co-op got the nurses interested while she was in St. Andrews hospital, we have thought of that as a possible way ~~eg~~ of getting in touch with hospital workers though we haven't had time to follow it up.

## Internal Organisation of the Food Co-op

We have put a lot of effort into the internal organisation of the food co-op, trying to make it as non-hierarchical and as shared as possible. About 15 women are involved from the estate and nearby areas, apart from the ~~Big Flame~~ 4-5 Big Flame women. It's grown in numbers since the beginning, with some turnover and different cliques dominating at different times; about five women have left for a variety of reasons, and new ones have come through personal contacts and a very few through our attempts to publicize the co-op. The limit on size is because of the amount of food we can physically cope with, but we have come to see that there are advantages in a small co-op as it means we can raise questions that wouldn't otherwise be possible.

We do the shopping at a cash'n'carry (meat, cereal, catfood, washing powder, cheese, biscuits, etc.) at a salvage warehouse (very cheap tinned food) and at a potato and egg ~~xxx~~ warehouse which ~~xxx~~ ~~is~~ is a direct outlet from a farm. The money turnover is roughly £100 each time.

All the women have children, with every variation from one grown-up child living at home to four or five young ones. All except about three of the women work out side the home as ~~well~~ well - as hospital ancillaries, in a local cake factory, cleaning offices, home helps, school meals assistant, secretaries, shop assistant, ~~xxx~~ playgroup leader, and school teacher. One woman did outwork. Some of this work is part-time, but in at least five cases it is full time. One woman was doing night shifts, and one woman does early morning cleaning. This means the women are working really hard, it says something about their economic situation and priorities, and has led us to think about ways of relating to those work situations.

Most of the families are living in G.L.C. or Tower Hamlets flats or ~~maisonettes~~ maisonettes, and so are not on the waiting list. However, all of them have had histories of living in bedsits, moving around, pressurizing the council, and taking the kids into the housing department. Three of the women were or ~~are~~ are living in old short-life property and are on the ~~a~~ waiting list. Some people, especially in the large tower blocks, have asked for a transfer, usually out of the area.

~~xxxxx~~ ~~the women~~ We tend to have a picture of the "typical working class family" -- white, respectable, in their thirties or forties, with 2 or 3 kids. It is not clear how the recomposition of the working ~~class~~ class has affected East London, but it is clear that the women in the food co-op at least do not conform to that picture. Some of the women are black, some are in mixed marriages, some are in one-parent families or are living with a man they're not married to, several are Jewish, one is into the Maharaji Ji, and several are in the C.P. It may be that the contradictions of these women's situation (like the contradictions which led many of us into the women's movement) are sharper and ~~they have xxx in xxx of xxx~~ their marginality somehow makes it easier for them to organise out side the home. But this "marginality" does not apply to all the women.

Some of the women are consciously political and militant in their attitudes, etc., some not so much. A great deal of individual anger, protest and fight is expressed at the conditions of life on the estate, the Council, the S.S., their husbands, other people's children. One of the things we try to do is draw out the common elements in people's experience and in their anger, so that it becomes more than just individual, and so that it does not divide ~~the~~ people from each other.

Meetings are usually well-attended; they're held in someone's flat every fortnight in the evening. The meeting place is changed each time so that people visit everyone's home and no-one gets to be particularly associated with having the meetings. People write out their orders together at the meeting, and there is usually discussion about what people are getting, what was good or bad last time. Money is put in the ~~first~~ float. The various ~~tasks~~ ~~xxx~~ ~~going~~ tasks - going to the different warehouses, packing up, weighing the mea



and cheese, etc. - are shared out. One big problem is that only four of us can drive - none of the women on the estate can, though some of their husbands have cars and a few are learning. This has meant that we have taken more responsibility than we wanted for getting the food. However, we always make sure two people at least go to each warehouse, including one non-driver. We are going to give driving lessons to some of the women - this is probably an important thing for anyone setting up another food co-op to think about. The food is packed up into individual orders and people come to collect it on Saturday morning and settle their bills. We check each other's sums. All this involves a high degree of trust, especially among women who haven't the experience of collective living that we have.

At the meetings - both ordering and collecting the food - there is always a lot of discussion and they/often go on for a long time - much longer than would be needed just for dealing with the food. Getting the idea of sharing and rotating the tasks accepted and operative has not been easy - but it has gradually happened. We still take most of the responsibility for making sure the tasks are covered and in that way we are rather dominant at the meetings. This is partly because of our central role in driving, but also because of the more fundamental problems of us being the initiators of the food co-op and how we see ourselves as intervening. We are very conscious that it could turn into a service provided by some people for others and have tried hard to ensure that it does not. Sometimes we have felt that our apparent self-confidence, energy etc. could be reinforcing other women's lack of confidence in themselves. To ensure this doesn't happen we have tried to be sensitive in the ways we have suggested new activities, not expecting people to speak out in front of everyone at a meeting, and making sure that new people know exactly what's happening. Also we have tried to show our own feelings of untogtherness, tiredness etc. when we have felt that way, rather than always thinking we have to be efficient, enthusiastic, cheerful and correct as part of the role of political interener. This problem is certainly not a static one, it changes as people do more things in the food co-op, see how we live, do other things with us. Nor is it one-way - on the estate have skills that we do not e.g. getting the money exactly right, and see us as hopeless at accounts.

Making attitudes to money more public in the food co-op has been something we have learned from, especially about differences that reflect our class positions. As revolutionaries with mostly middle class families, middle class educational and in some cases ~~unusually~~ occupational histories, we have chosen to be less well off economically than we could be if we worked more or in different jobs. Most of the women in the co-op have not had this choice, even though some of their families have a higher standard of living than we do. Our relationship to production, because of our class position, is very different, and so is our relationship to the struggle to live. This leads us to be much more casual than many of the working class women about running the co-op as efficiently as possible, and getting the accounts exactly right. This reflects our assurance that money will always come from somewhere, that you don't worry about 5p, that it is better to do without many commodities than to kill yourself working for them. We have in the past tended to see ourselves as somehow outside a lot of consumerism, of the power of money and commodity consumption in people's lives. One of the effects of the food co-op has been to increase our awareness of these differences and their origins, and not to mystify our present situations.

Another effect of the way we work in the food co-op has been the spreading of ideas that come from the women's movement - shared child care, questioning sex roles in children and between adults, the stereotype men have of housework as not real work, etc. - to women who might not otherwise be reached by these ideas. The ideas come up, not abstractly as bra-burning, but through discussion about people's daily experience. The food co-op is in some ways a practical embodiment of the ideas of women's liberation, and just by women organising it together it raises many of those questions in a concrete form. The effect is limited by how much people can in fact change their material situations, but many women have got a lot of confidence and support in questioning their husbands' attitudes and perceptions of them, as a result of their involvement

in the food co-op and associated activities. One woman whose husband orders her around quite a bit answered him back when he came into ~~the room~~ ~~from~~ a recent meeting which was held at her flat - "Get your own sugar!" - and looked round all of us for support. Another woman who has been the wife of a C.P. militant for about 15 years had never been leafletting herself ever until a situation which came out of the food co-op. When we started using the shop-front of one woman's house for keeping food, her husband became quite resentful about having a whole crowd of women turning up at his place - delivering food, packing it up into boxes, collecting it.... He objected to her going to meetings, wouldn't pick up the kids from playgroup, and the co-op became part of their on-going battle about her performing her role as mother and housewife as he defined it. It looked as if we'd have to move out. One night she came to the pub with us after the meeting, and when we got back her husband had locked her out - we waited nervously in the car while she banged on the door, wondering if we'd gone too far - but finally she was let into the house. These are just a few examples of the way the whole question of women's roles gets raised through the co-op. We in Big Flame also get strength and confidence from organising with women & developing our own politics independently of men.

There are not a lot of precedents for organising outside the industrial situation. One thing we have learned (if we didn't know it already) is how useless most conventional forms of propaganda and publicity are in mobilising and involving women in this situation. Only one person has joined the food co-op through our leaflets - the rest all through networks of personal contacts, or by doing other things with us. Also we have found that meetings do not work at all according to the model evolved in male left politics: ~~one~~ ~~person~~ ~~talks~~ ~~at~~ ~~a~~ ~~time~~ where one person talks at a time, there is some kind of agenda, and clear decisions are reached after ~~the~~ ~~discussion~~ a focussed discussion. Sometimes there is a choice between pushing for everyone to concentrate on one question (should we sell on the green? should we get eggs at a different place if the price goes up?), and letting a ~~much~~ ~~more~~ ~~interesting~~ ~~and~~ ~~energetic~~ ~~discussion~~ develop as different groups and individuals talk to one another about what ~~is~~ ~~most~~ ~~important~~ they most want to talk about, which may be eggs ~~or~~ ~~childcare~~ or childcare or the lifts. It raises the question whether ~~the~~ ~~traditional~~ ~~meeting~~ ~~is~~ ~~a~~ ~~suitable~~ ~~model~~ for organising in this situation. Certainly making decisions, sustaining involvement and widening the scope of the food co-op depends a great deal on individual visiting, talking, etc.

Together, the food co-op has been very important for us as women militants in developing our understanding of how we can work politically. Our own histories from the women's movement has made us unwilling to appear as an external political group, mouthing slogans for situations we had no direct involvement in. The food co-op has provided regular and material contact with working class women over something of immediate and real concern to us all. Cheap food and shared shopping and housework is something we ~~wanted~~ ~~anyhow~~ ~~to~~ ~~get~~ would anyhow be organising ourselves to get, and this lessens the us/them or inside/outside aspects of many left group interventions. It has been relatively easy to talk without feeling we are just relating to other people's ~~rather~~ ~~than~~ ~~our~~ ~~own~~ ~~experience~~. Breaking down isolation between people and families, making friends in the area, is also a need of ours, and the food co-op has been very effective in this way - one woman on the estate hardly knew anyone before she joined, and there are other examples. We have met lots of friends and comrades through it.

Getting to know people through the food co-op has been part of a process of change for us individually. It has helped us understand differences that we as middle class women often feel from working class women. It has often been quite challenging, forcing us to examine and change some of our ways of relating to people. Given our class position, and our marginality as revolutionaries, these effects of the co-op on us are very important in evaluating it. What we have learned through the food co-op has also given more reality to our politics generally - it has helped us understand how capitalism affects every moment of our day, and the oppressive exploitative relationships it produces day to day. Organising round housework is the beginning of making it possible



for women to fight back, overcoming women's "passivity" - a bourgeois description of the fact that as a wife and mother you have to run to stand still.

On the whole, we have not put ourselves forward as Big Flame, nor talked about Big Flame as such. Most of the women on the estate know we are part of a political group, and some, especially the C.P. women, know it as Big Flame. The fact that "we want to do something in the area" does not seem strange here as it would in many other places for historical reasons. A few of the women could be regarded as being part of Big Flame in that they do a lot of things with us, and share our perspectives in the food co-op, but it has never seemed important to push this issue. Most of the reasons for this reticence are to do with not wanting to appear as external politicians, using people for their own ends, and our wanting to learn how to be inside ongoing struggles.

The Food Co-op as an Area Group : Does our politics have to be confrontational?

At the beginning we'd seen the food co-op as a way of building a base and getting to know some women in the East End. We realized that this was the most promising starting point for us working in the community. We'd seen the failure of paper organisations like EEDAG (East End Docklands Action Group - an area-wide grouping supposed to fight issues around redevelopment). We'd had discussions with women from Nottingham Womens Liberation who like us had started a prices campaign but had used "official channels" like the Trades Council and had had support from women trades unionists in picketing supermarkets; but found that this did not lead on to support from women on estates or any form of ongoing and developing struggle. All this meant that we hoped that out of the women organising in the food co-op, breaking down the isolation and ~~mistrust~~ mistrust on the estate, that the group would begin to relate to other more spectacular or confrontational struggles in the area. We also wanted to see whether we could develop the ideas some of us had from the womens movement and therapy groups with working class women.

outside the family

The development into confrontational struggles has not happened for several reasons. In spite of recognizing early on the isolation of women on an estate and the demoralization of the rent strike, we underestimated the amount of time it takes to build up any sort of organisation and solidarity. This meant that when issues came up which could have become focusses for collective confrontation and might have turned the co-op into the basis for a tenants' action group - e.g. the community hall, the dustman's strike, the stinking drains in the tower blocks and periodic sewage floods, the insects and the dangerous roads - people were full of complaints and anger but were not ready or confident enough to take collective action. The history of the food co-op, coming out of an attempt to organise round rising prices, meant that from time to time we discussed ways of taking more militant action against supermarkets - some of the women were really interested in this, but for some of us anger over rising prices has been defused by getting cheap food through the co-op. Our discussions also raised tricky questions of how many people would need to be involved to give the action any credibility, and where the real targets are.

We also have to seek this in a broader context - to recognize that during the period we have been working in the food co-op, wages militancy and individual or "passive" resistance in the community (e.g. "fixing" your electricity - rent arrears...) have been the main weapons used by the working class to fight back against capitalism. Where there has been direct action in the community it has been taken by those people who have no alternative i.e. those people who have no home rather than those who have unsatisfactory, overpriced homes. At the moment (Dec 1974) there is still a gap between these two groups of people. This came out really clearly for us when 54 East End families, known as "Faceless Homeless" squatted an empty block of flats just opposite the Lincoln Estate. Some of the Big Flame women went over to talk to them and we tried to

~~work out ways of building links & even ~~xxxxxx~~ & ~~xxxx~~ ~~xxxxxx~~ ~~xxxxxx~~ ~~xxxxxx~~ ~~xxxxxx~~ ~~xxxxxx~~ ~~xxxxxx~~~~

work out ways of building links - even to start a food co-op in the block, which is called ~~Summer~~ Sumner House. Several food co-op women ~~were involved~~ with us in helping to run a jumble ~~house~~ with the Sumner House people and ~~through~~ brought their ~~children~~ kids Christmas party came and brought their kids to a jumble sale and a kids Christmas party which we helped the Sumner House people to organise. But many of the women in the ~~food co-op~~ relationship between themselves and the Sumner House "squatters". Possibly one reason why they don't want to associate themselves closely with them ~~is~~ because the ~~Sumner House~~ homeless Sumner House people are in precisely the situation that they most fear to be in themselves. Since people in the food co-op got flats from the GLC ~~often~~ often after years on the housing list, they still believe that the housing list is a reality and that squatting a block of flats, which could be used to rehouse people from the list, is jumping the housing queue; in the same way, many women have their names down for housing transfer and half believe that this will happen (every now and then one family does get a transfer, which reinforces the myth). Gradually these myths are breaking down - Tower Hamlets Council is now running a housing lottery for young homeless couples, which confirms the feeling that getting a house is a bit like winning the football pools. The mass squat at Sumner House is now organising against eviction and the other squatters in the area have taken the initiative in trying to set up a Housing Action Group amongst tenants and squatters all over the borough. It seems likely that when the rent freeze ends in March, tenants will begin to organise collectively again around rent increases. In East London Big Flame, we have seen the importance of building up a strong ~~in~~ area grouping; some men from the group are now getting involved in Sumner House and the Housing Action ~~Group~~ Group, bringing the experience and contacts they have developed through their activities with building workers on the East End Shrewsbury Defence Committee over the last year.

This situation has led us to question our sense of what is a "real" intervention. We are intervening in housework, childcare and other family relationships, but we've often had a sense of this not being the "real" intervention, because we've applied ~~at~~ standards which we now see as false. If and when struggles in the area do become more obviously confrontational, this will only mean that questions of housework, childcare and family relationships, are raised even more pressingly, as we have seen in previous struggles, like on Tower Hill.

It is within this perspective that we have tried to work out ways in which organising in the food co-op could be developed. We have had lots of different ideas which we are still in the process of evaluating and discussing - developing the social aspect of the food co-op by showing films, Red Ladder theatre, socials etc. has seemed a good idea as many of us, on the estate and in Big Flame feel that a social life is one of the most pressing needs that we ask from any political activity we're involved in. Against a background of Bingo, it's important that we try to build some kind of local revolutionary culture, and see our leisure as another area of our lives which has to be reclaimed from capital. It's true that solidarity is built up through struggle, but it is consolidated through a shared ~~and~~ social life. There are already strong social links between militants in this area, for example the E.L. Football League, but these could be extended and the content made more overtly political. Other possible developments of the food co-op are enlarging the food co-op as a way of building up a big group of women who would be in a better position to take action on the estate, in a general Tower Hamlets Housing Group, or around prices; starting a women's centre on the estate as a way of increasing the social activity between women and having premises where ~~where~~ women can do things together, have access to women's literature, etc.; trying to encourage the setting up of food co-ops on several estates in the area as a way of building groups of active women; working as a tenants' action group on the estate, ~~more~~ more or less independently of the food co-op though building on it, and linking this with the building workers action group which developed from the Shrewsbury Defence Committee.

As East London is a traditional working class area with a history of militancy, we have started from a different point in our organising than we might have done in another area. The effects of this can be seen in what we've written here.

## Economic and Political Background

We ~~must~~ need to be able to understand and integrate what we know about workers' struggles in production, to struggles happening outside of production. We tend to pose this as a problem for industrial militants - "what about the community? what about the family?" - forgetting that it is a problem for us too. We need to show how food prices, rents, the family, schools and hospitals are economically integrated into capitalist production and to the struggles in ~~the~~ ~~under~~ production.

The period during and since the war has seen many changes in the structure and organisation of capitalist society - changes which arise more or less directly out of working class militancy in the period between the wars, and which affect the nature and direction of working class militancy in the present period.

The important change is in the organic composition of capital, that is, in the proportion of capital invested in plant and machinery (which is increasing) to the proportion of capital invested in labour power (which is decreasing). ~~As~~ Workers' militancy over wages has always driven capitalists to invest more in machinery. Mechanization has made labour more productive (you can make 20 dresses with a sewing machine in the time it takes to make one by hand), so capitalists have been able to meet demands for wage increases, by producing and selling more commodities.

A consequence of this change in the organic composition of capital is that the biggest profits can be made in the industries which are most capital intensive and this has meant that industries which are labour intensive and hard to mechanize are not so profitable. These include building, food production, transport, medicine, and fuel production. Naturally enough the capitalists, wanting to invest their money as profitably as possible, have tended to withdraw their investment from these areas, into the areas of mass production. However, it is these unprofitable labour-intensive industries which often produce the basics of life; in particular, they are often essential to the reproduction of labour power, and therefore of the whole capitalist system itself.

At this point, the state, as the collective brain of capitalism, intervenes to ensure that the capitalist system does not destroy itself in the chaos and anarchy of 'free competition', and this intervention may take the form of nationalizing and/or subsidizing unprofitable but essential industries, or interfering in the 'free' market so that these industries may still operate in the market ~~as~~ at a profit.

In Britain, the nationalization of coal, steel, transport, and the municipalization of housing and the health service and the ~~benefits~~ benefits of the welfare state are to be seen as part of the new post-Keynesian policy of integrating the working class into the capitalist system. The state itself undertakes to provide the basic essentials for the reproduction and maintenance of the working class; it does this out of taxes which are paid by the workers, but also by taxes paid by the companies, which come out of profits created by the workers. In effect then, all the welfare state does, ~~it~~ is to force the capitalists to put by enough of their profits to allow the workers to subsist (though even this seems too much for some of them). This guaranteed subsistence is itself a major victory for the working class, a culmination of a century of struggle; but we can see clearly here how this victory is reshaped by the ruling class into something beneficial to the survival of the system. Because the costs of this do not come directly out of the wages of workers, moreover, it has often meant that wages in Britain are relatively lower than those in Europe, because some of the basic expenses are subsidized by the state.

Food subsidies are an example of this; food has been cheap in Britain as so much of it has come from the Empire, and ~~was~~ even before the war, food and ~~housing~~ housing were subsidized. With the diminution of the Empire, production in Britain has become more important again; farming here is already extremely capital intensive and mechanized compared with farming in Europe. There is

peasant class as such, and far fewer labourers per acre than in Europe, partly because the relatively high wages of the high-profit industries have attracted people to the cities, partly because the landowners have been so ruthless in their 'rationalization of farming'. So it has made sense for the state, within its 'welfare' framework of providing basics ~~generally~~ cheaply, to subsidize directly the incomes of farmers, to encourage them to produce in sufficient quantities (so there will be no scarcities or price rises due to scarcities), then to allow the produce to find its own price on the market, which is fairly low.

In Europe, the policy of governments has on the whole been to adopt a much more laissez-faire attitude. Although they have nationalized fuel, transport and other essential industries, they have tended to allow food and housing to find their own levels on the market. Before the last war, when the level of capital investment in industry was still relatively low, this did not matter too much, as food and housing were still profitable to produce and so were produced. More recently, however, food producers in Europe have been finding that the prices their produce will fetch on the open market is so low as to scarcely furnish them with a living. A cutback in production would create scarcity, and would force workers off the land into the factories, but on the whole the farm-workers in Europe have been strongly enough organised to force a different solution, that known as the EEC agricultural policy. Farmers produce as before, & the state guarantees a certain price; if, because of overproduction (too much supply, too little demand) the price drops, the state will buy up the product in order to maintain an artificial condition of scarcity, and so force the price up again. (Butter mountains).

This means that workers in Europe have to pay nearer the market price for their basic essentials, and on the whole they have made up for this by a high level of organization and militancy over wages. By fighting for higher wages, they have effectively forced the European capitalists to subsidize the unprofitable but essential industries. This has been alright while the industrial capitalists have been making enough profits to allow this, but in a situation of crisis, as at present, the level of class struggle which expresses itself directly as wages militancy, becomes acute.

It is important to consider the present class struggle in relation to the specific development of British Capitalism. In particular, the 'welfare' policy towards food and housing, itself a victory of working class struggle, means that maintaining subsidies in these areas, and forcing the bosses to pay for them in higher taxes, is an important aspect of working class struggle in this country. Fighting the Housing Finance Act (which was designed to make the working class pay directly for the cost of housing) and fighting to keep food cheap and the health service free are as important aspects of working class struggle as fighting for higher wages.

In particular, at this moment the ruling class, by trying to enter Britain into the EEC, is trying to steal an important march on the workers. They are trying to adopt the EEC food policy, which will lead to high food prices at unsubsidized 'market' levels, and hoping that in the interval before wages militancy has caught up with this (wages militancy, that is, hampered by a whole paraphernalia of legal shackles), the working class will suffer a setback in its standard of living which will take years of struggle to make up. That is why it is particularly important at this moment to fight against the loss of any subsidies. There can be no doubt at all that it is the threat of militancy both in the form of high wage demands, and also in the form of social unrest and direct action over food and housing, which has compelled the government to retain some food subsidies in the face of strong pressure from the EEC, and to renegotiate our terms of entry into the EEC.

It is important that we learn to see militancy over wages and militancy over food, housing and welfare as part of a whole cycle of struggle by which we keep the capitalists on the run. At the same time, it is important that the working class begins to take control over resources in the community, such as food distribution and housing management. We have seen in Chile that when the middlemen went on strike in an attempt to break the revolutionary impetus of the workers, the ability of working class organisations in the community to take control over food distribution proved crucial to the advancement of the revolution.

## The Food Co-op in a Feminist Perspective

Working in the food co-op has raised some questions for us about consumerism in relation to women. Some people have described consumerism as a process by which we, especially women, are manipulated into buying things we don't need so that the capitalists can keep expanding their sales. Others see consumerism as a genuine compensation for oppression, a rational self-interested response by women towards at least doing as well out of the system as they can. Some of the Big Flame women feel that their attitude to consumption is fundamentally different from that of the food co-op women on the Lincoln Estate. But what sometimes distances me from women on the estate is not our different value systems ("consumerism" versus "downwards social mobility") but the different work we perform.

"For women, buying and wearing clothes and beauty aids is not much consumption as work. One of a woman's jobs in this society is to be an attractive sexual object, and clothes and make-up are ~~key~~ tools of the trade... Similarly, buying food and household furnishing is a domestic task... and appliances and cleaning materials are tools that facilitate her domestic functions. A washing machine does make a housewife's work easier (in the absence of socialised housework)..... When a woman spends a lot of time decorating her home, herself, or hunting down the latest in vacuum cleaners, it is not self-indulgence (let alone the result of psychic manipulation) but a healthy attempt to find outlets for her creative energies within her circumscribed ~~role~~ role." - Ellen Willis in "Consumerism" and Women, from 'Women's Liberation'.

So in organising with women around food the question for me is not: are we organising around their/our real needs? (that we don't buy makeup wholesale as well as food does not make our need for male recognition in this culture any the less real.) The question is more: Where do the needs of housewives meet the needs of single women who have refused housework as the hardest and least recognised work there is? The need for friendship and a collective identity seems to be one which we all share. The core of the food co-op (for me) is the women who enjoy it. This is where feminism puts a new perspective on what it means to be active. The wife of a "militant" may have survived through constant self-negation and putting other priorities before herself. Other women, less overtly political, may be quicker to grasp the food co-op as a blow against boring and routinised labour, and part of the process of making a life of their own. The services women perform for men cannot be subsumed under a "housework" heading (cf. Power of Women) and their effects on our identity ignored. We have already pointed out how many of the women who feel free to participate in the food co-op (or are forced to by their economic position) are, like the most militant women at Imperial and like several of those separated from their husbands; and how many others face violence from their husbands partly over the issues of visits from other women in the co-op and keeping food parcels in their flat. The Women's Self-Help Therapy Group helps us to work out and get in touch with our own needs, but for the fight women face when we start to make demands based on those needs, we need a karate group too.

This means that we can't provide a "feminist perspective" by ourselves. It could be a priority for those of us in Big Flame to work with other feminists providing a strong area support network. We have the potential for this in the Women's Aid centre, women's squatting groups, other food co-ops, tenants co-operatives like Sumner House. At the moment these groups are ~~quite~~ separate and, to some extent, mistrustful - but they are a beginning, and our next need is to create a strong women's centre with films, discussions, health groups, legal aid. Feminism brings new areas of women's lives into political existence - for example we can see women's anger at their husbands as part of our struggle and not a side issue (as e.g. IS do and fall back on consolidating the family just when its disintegration is a force for change). We put a new value on feelings which women may have experienced in isolation as madness or failure, partly ~~through~~ through the writings, films, ideas of the existing women's movement. But this new value has to take on organisational forms. For example, a really supportive women's aid centre could help us make women's rebellion against their husbands into a force for change within the   
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area, not something which forces women to choose between submission and leaving the neighbourhood. We are trying to act out of the politics of women's existing situation, rather than "injecting politics" into itx (IMG phrase) - the move from prices campaign to food co-op seems to me to have been a step in this direction.

### CHANGING SOCIAL RELATIONS IN THE FOOD CO-OP

When we were talking about starting a food co-op, we were not sure if ~~men~~ people would be interested, because a lot of the women we talked to around here had already found some kind of individual solutions to ~~rix~~ rising prices - getting a freezer, knowing someone who has a market ~~xx~~ stall, or getting things off the back of a lorry. At the first meeting it became clear that people were proud of these individual solutions, which made them feel they were good shoppers and skilfull low-budget cooks - "I know a little shop where you can get jam for 12p, it's difficult to find....." "You don't get eggs from there, do you, I wouldn't touch his eggs, I know a much better place..." It was quite competitive, a bit like skilled workers who identified with their jobs and are proud of their skill at being better at it than others. There was also quite a lot of brand fetishism: "I only use Heinz Baked beans, - I wouldn't touch anything else, I'm funny that way", which also carried a lot of pride, as if it made you more of an individual, more interesting and special, if you go for Daz and wouldn't touch Chivers' jam.

As the food co-op got going, people began, hesitantly at first, to share their expertise with one another so the food co-op could use the various cheap sources of food that they had discovered individually. The competitiveness gradually changed from "I know the best place" to "Our food co-op knows the best place." Instead of identifying yourself as a skilled shopper, you identify yourself as a member of a ~~xxxxxx~~ ~~xxxxxx~~ strong food co-op. Collective shopping also meant that instead of choosing your own can of beans, you get whatever beans the people who went to the Cash'n'Carry thought was the best bargain to buy in bulk. There were complaints at first - "I never use that kind" - but now people mostly accept getting a different type of cereal each time and trusting the choice of whoever did the shopping. A lot of individual identification through skill in shopping is destroyed, and a different relationship takes its place. Although the food co-op only happens fortnightly, we get a wide range of goods from tea to toilet rolls, and and so it adds up to a real change in the shopping and consuming patterns of the people involved. Nobody lives entirely off food co-op goods, it probably doesn't change shopping at the corner shop for oddments that you've run out of, but makes a difference to the big Saturday outing to the supermarket. It also changes the relations of the ~~women~~ women involved to their husbands in their role as shopper: whereas before they ~~xxxx~~ always did shopping personally for him, there is now a group of women who make decisions about what to get and who collectively present some kind of reference point independent of the husband, questioning his fads and setting up collective norms of consumption of its own.

There are other ways in which the food co-op breaks down the family as the unit of consumption. The meat is stored overnight in different people's fridges, and the women with freezers regularly find them used by the food co-op as a whole. Whether or not we see the need for food - which the food co-op is organised around - as necessarily more "real" than the need for consumer goodies, which the ~~x~~ capitalists make more profit out of selling to us, it is obvious that by each family buying e.g. a washing machine for themselves, the level of consumption of hardware becomes artificially high, and this is something we can fight.

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In our wish to see the food co-op develop into an 'attacking' organisation we have often underestimated the importance of some of these points:



the ways in which its working challenges patterns of consumption and the family. The fight against prices is not just against the shops/distributors/food manufacturers, whose profits we hit only slightly, but also the relationships which are part and parcel of consumption eg. the family, position of women. Even a mass movement of food coops would only hit the profits of certain middlemen, but the organisation of a food coop can work towards destroying the fabric of social relations on which the survival of capitalism depends.

The very fact of women organising together in this way gives us all a lot of confidence - that by getting together we can do better for ourselves by reclaiming one area of our lives from the capitalists, that we don't have to be passive but can take some control over our own lives. "Every struggle must be regarded in terms of the strength, awareness, solidarity and autonomy that the proletariat acquires in it, while the power of the bosses to encroach on our lives is reduced."

Sometimes the Wednesday meetings are just about making out our orders, but often there are discussions about all kinds of things, - the conditions of life on the estate, lifts, drains, bringing up children, the council, work, sterilization, housing battles, parents and our own childhoods, schools, vandalism, nervous breakdowns.... It became clear that people needed to have a situation to meet other women and talk. There are a lot of splits between women, and a lot of isolation in people's lives. It looked like we all needed friends as much as we needed cheap food. We talked about the idea of having a women's group to meet for discussions on the alternate Wednesdays when we weren't having the food coop meeting. What finally emerged is a women's self-help therapy group which after several months and a few people dropping out, now consistently involves three of us from the food coop (one from Big Flame, one from Lincoln Estate, one from a nearby estate) and a CP comrade whom we met through the women's centre.

I had been doing a lot of reading and practice in my own life around the ideas of Wilhelm Reich and the Gestalt therapists, and wanted to bridge the gap between that activity and my other political activity in the area. This is why I wanted to set up something which was a bit different from an ordinary consciousness-raising group, though in some ways similar. It reflected an understanding that for us to be able to progress in struggle it's not enough for us to be presented with new situations and new understandings - we also have to change at the level of our feelings and gut reactions, undoing the conditioning that plays as important a part in keeping us passive as anything that is happening in the present. This means that in the group we do body work - massage and Reichian breathing exercises - and try not just to talk about, but to locate and express, the feelings that daily life under capitalism makes us feel, but compels us to control. The group had developed falteringly and its future is still unsure, but some positive things have come out of it. For example one of us who has always played the role of being 'nice' and 'quiet' says that she had been getting into her anger much more, it has been coming out in dissatisfaction at her job, challenging her evening-class teacher etc. At another time it might be one of us who has a full-time job expressing physically and non-verbally the stress she experiences in keeping at work - which she usually puts a good face on - and realizing how much she needs solidarity and support. When these feelings have been located it becomes easier to act on the world according to your needs.

The group has made several outings en masse to the so-called 'growth centres'. These visits have been useful in developing our knowledge of certain techniques eg for body relaxation and awareness, working out compliance with authority roles, acting-out games etc. At the same time we have disagreed with the way those techniques are used at 'growth centres', and have made a vigorous critique of the way 'personal growth' is defined at these institutions and sold to those who can afford it.

We have had discussions towards working out a clear collective alternative to these centres and to valium and ECT as ways out of the emotional and social impasse capitalism forces us into.

I see people's consciousness and hence their political actions as being determined by their total material reality - their everyday lives past and present. This is different from the Trot groups with their clear line between reality and ideology, and their emphasis on newspapers as a way of changing people's consciousness. Consciousness is complicated and contradictory, as social experience under capitalism is complicated and contradictory. A kid can hate being caged up in a stuffy classroom, but that feeling is overlaid by fear of being punished if he goes out of it. The consciousness and the responses that are potentially socialist and revolutionary are the ones we need to draw out and build on, but sometimes they lie deep under layers of self-criticism and internalized repression, which need to be recognized and worked through.

When we say that material reality determines consciousness, it's important to understand what that material reality includes. It's where we live and what work we do, but it's also the ads we see on the tube, the television programmes we watch, the relationships we have, and how we are in those relationships. It includes taking part in the food-coop, going to therapy meetings where you can find and express your anger, and building up relationships of trust and solidarity with other women.



These are some of the points we would like to raise for discussion\*\*  
IN THE WOMEN'S COMMISSION

1. Being in B.F.: how it helps and doesn't help us to work politically.
2. Working as women; our relationship to the WLM. (see sect. of Feminism p.9)
3. Organizing around socialization of housework.
4. Relationships and differences between organizing where people work and organizing in the community.

IN THE EAST LONDON PRIORITIES MEETING

1. Working as an 'area group'.
2. Further work around Sumner House.
3. Relation between wage struggles and organizing in the community.
4. the food co-op as a women's group.
5. An E.L. hospital group?