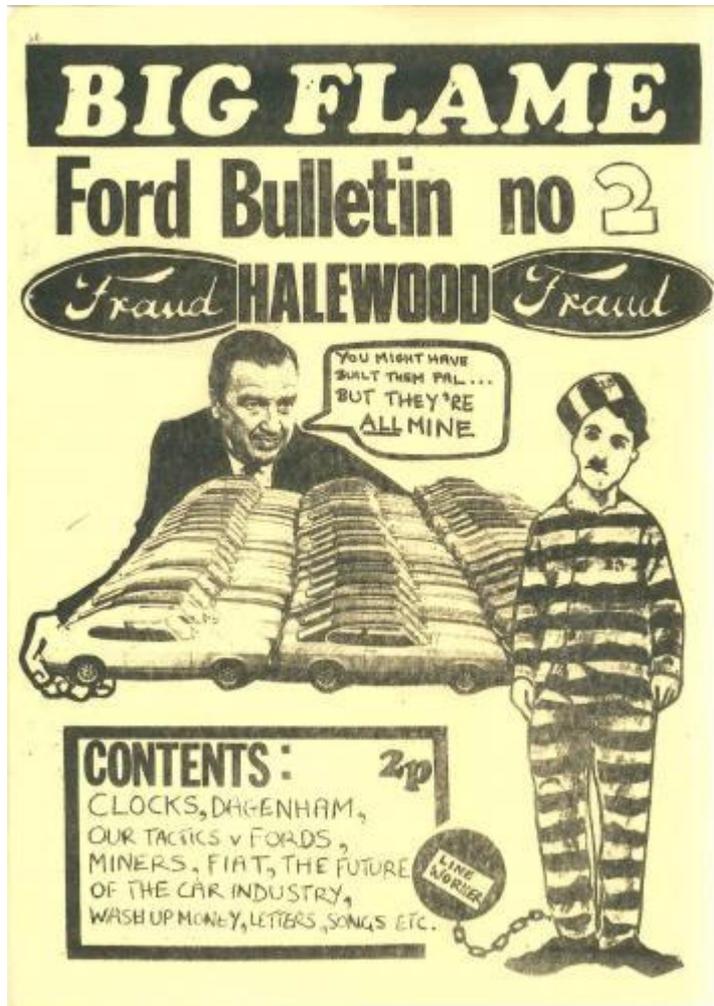


Solidarity and the neo-narodniks, 1972 - Solidarity



Solidarity's polemic aimed at Big Flame, following an exchange around the events of the Fisher Bendix occupation.

Big Flame (henceforth abbreviated B.F.) is a Merseyside group which publishes occasional broadsheets relating to working class struggles. Some of their publications have been excellent – we have even used some of their material – but others re pretty confused. They have never made any clear statements about their political beliefs, largely because as a group they do not appear to have any. In private conversations some call themselves anarchists, some Maoists, and some “third world”. Still others boast about being non-political. What unites them is a certain concept of industrial work, which they believe can transcend politics.

A few weeks ago Solidarity (London) and other Solidarity groups received a couple of undated photostated sheets from the publishers of B.F. In these they severely criticise our most recent pamphlet [Under New Management? The Fisher-Bendix Occupation](#). They even describe some of the views put forward in this pamphlet as “criminal”. The subject matter they object to had not previously been discussed between us.

We feel that the matters raised – and the method in which they were raised – deserve wider discussion. They are examples of much that is wrong with the movement. We have therefore decided to publish the B.F. letter in full, together with a reply. The course of this reply we hope to initiate a wider political discussion of the differences between “militants” and “revolutionaries” – and of the differences between the concept of “autonomy” and the concept of “spontaneity”. We hope that this discussion will transcend our particular differences with Big Flame.

To give readers a better insight into the way B.F. viewed the recent struggle at Fisher-Bendix we are also publishing excerpts from their Broadsheet about the dispute. Having read these documents carefully we suggest that readers look again at our pamphlet – and draw their own conclusions.

The Big Flame letter

This is a letter of criticism addressed to Solidarity (London) about their recent pamphlet, *Under New Management? The Fisher Bendix Occupation*. We think that the pamphlet itself is a product of the way in which Solidarity works, and that it shows a large gap between your theory and practice. Despite your theory of self-activity and self-management, you are mainly a pamphlet-producing group. Therefore your response to any important issue is to write a pamphlet or an article about it. But because as a group you are divorced from working class struggles you are unable to write about the situation with any real understanding.

A clear example of this is the way Solidarity acted about Fisher-Bendix. Three of your members came up to Kirkby to visit the factory. But what can you understand from a visit? The draft for the pamphlet was written on the basis of a discussion with members of the Occupation Committee. Coming in from the outside, not knowing anyone in the factory, you could only speak to the Committee, but remember, you get their view, which is not necessarily that of all the workers.

Throughout the pamphlet there is a constant confusion between workers and shop stewards. You say: ‘The stewards remaining in the factory had given the signal for workers to join in a march to the Admin Block as previously arranged with the stewards who were ‘negotiating’’. In fact, this march on the Admin Block was not organized or led by the stewards, but by a group of young workers. Effectively you have denied the autonomy and self-activity of these workers – something which Solidarity has spent much time denouncing other groups for doing. But, as we said, this kind of thing is inevitable from the whole way in which you write about struggles, whilst being divorced from them. At least, when groups like IS [International Socialism] do this, they know they’re doing it – though this is also the logic of their position, which says that they must recruit shop stewards as being the vanguard of the working class. Obviously they cannot criticize them too much if they want to recruit them. And they were trying very hard to recruit Jack Spriggs, the convenor.

Although you say “the stewards then started to plan a course of action”: and that “the stewards were now negotiating with their own objectives in mind”: and again, “It was agreed that the workers would respond to a call from the stewards ...”: yet you are also able to say “the workers set about organizing committees to take charge of various aspects of the occupation”. This is not so, the stewards did it.

Towards the end of the pamphlet we have some euphoria about how the occupation was run. We quote: ‘The workers are developing their own self-confidence to act for themselves. They

are showing in practice how to solve problems on the basis of real democratic decision-making. I learned something very new at Fisher-Bendix. We asked about how decisions were made. How did the committees function?" "The Occupation Committee was based on the original Shop Stewards Committee covering the workers as members of different unions. But it was now an autonomous committee with many additions designed to run the occupation in daily contact with all the workers. This is the great advantage of an occupation. There are always rank and file workers on hand to see what is going on. They can constantly be consulted, or for that matter intervene if they feel it is necessary".

The reality was very different. All the decisions and all the interesting activity was done by the committee. Relationships did not basically change during the occupation. There was still a passive majority and an active minority, who ran the show. The mass meetings did not "send a thrill right through" anyone. They were passive events. The only speakers were those from the platform, sometimes only the convenor would speak. The speeches were followed by applause and a ritual show of hands for the TV cameras. There were no important questions asked or any general discussion. Everything was left to the committee and merely ratified by the mass meetings. Even at the last mass meeting, there was no discussion about the details or the implications of the agreement, which had been mediated by Harold Wilson.

When you say that the committee "was now an autonomous committee" that was truer than you think. It was autonomous unto itself and not really accountable to the workers because, with so little real involvement or information themselves, they were in no position to question the committee. There were several workers who were very critical of the way the committee was set up and the way it operated. But there were not enough of them, so they did not feel confident or strong enough to voice their criticisms.

Whilst saying all this, we don't really blame the people on the committee.

They acted in the way that good trade unionists always do and within the structures that they have always known. Because of this it is all the more criminal for revolutionary groups like solidarity to bolster up these attitudes and these structures, which help to maintain the passivity of masses of working class people.

Excerpts from the B.F Broadsheet ("Bendix: How the Workers Took Over (A Group of Workers Say How It Happened)")

After the Xmas holiday the factory grew tense. Thorn's said the run down would begin on January 3rd, a Monday. Everybody felt things were coming to ahead. Sit-ins were being discussed.

There was a false start on the 4th, Tuesday, when the stewards issued a half hour ultimatum to the bosses. But it was soon extended for 24 hours. It was obvious Thorn's didn't really take our threats seriously. They weren't taking any precautions against a sit-in. Over the last few weeks some of us had got together because we felt something had to be done about the close down. There were about eighteen of us. Our idea was to stage a demonstration that would prove to management that we were dead serious, the stewards were not alone in the struggle. On Wednesday the ultimatum ran out and the stewards were meeting the management in the boardroom. We were only certain about five minutes before it happened that we wanted a demo. And we had to keep quiet because of security.

So when we started the march to the Administration, it wasn't really spontaneous for us. About 150 workers filed up the stairs shouting "Industrial Assassin", but as we got nearer to the boardroom it turned into a softer chant of "Out, out, out!"

This was it. We'd forced the issue, and shown how militant we were, but outside the boardroom door we suddenly felt childish. Nobody wanted to go in. It was like a barrier at the door that we hadn't the nerve to cross, after we'd spent months and years taking orders from the managers. Outside there was this terrible feeling of frustration because nobody would walk in. Suddenly, Tom, probably knowing there was no choice, stepped in and the rest followed. Once you're in, there's no problem – they're only men.

Within a few minutes the boardroom was packed tight with over fifty of us. The atmosphere was so tense that one wrong word would have turned it into a barney. Then Jack Spriggs, the convenor, got up and told the management they had fifteen minutes to make up their minds or we would have to ask them to leave the premises. If they were scared – and they must have been, seeing the looks on our faces they didn't show it. Of course they left. You see, there comes a point when demos have to stop and action begins. We'd no idea until it happened that there would be an occupation that morning. It just happened spontaneously, it came out of the situation, and suddenly everybody knew what we had to do without anyone saying right, lad, we're going to have a sit-in!"

During the nine week strike, only about fifty of us were involved, it was difficult to find pickets and some workers were out there fourteen hours a day. I also think We're doing Thorn's more damage this way. Of course a sit-in would be useless if :horn's were skint, but we don't believe they are. They've got orders for £1 m worth of radiators for the next few years. I think this has shown the utter folly of strikes. Women we couldn't get out with us on the nine week strike are now involved as anyone else in the occupation.

And there's another thing about sit-ins. He (pointing to a worker across the table) works nine feet away from me but this is the first time I ever talked to him. This has brought us all closer together and everybody's talking about things. In a way, we're not so inhibited now! These sit-ins should be the start of our industrial revolution. The workers should be left to run the factories providing they do it efficiently. We can't leave it to anybody else anymore. There's no choice between the governments.

The problem here is that we're not all involved in what's going on. Twenty stewards are doing nearly everything. I'm just a glorified telephone arranging pickets, so that a few people can go to meetings to make decisions I'll follow. There weren't enough stewards – one department has two for 240 men. It's a big problem we're going to have a sort out together if we're going to stick together.

Our reply

Leaving aside for the moment the abuse ("criminal" bolstering up of reactionary attitudes and structures), the snide allegations ("mainly a pamphlet producing group ... divorced from working class struggles"), and the factual inaccuracies ("coming from the outside ... you could only speak to the Committee") – all of which we will deal with later – the B.F. letter contains two main criticisms of the Solidarity pamphlet.

The first is that the Solidarity pamphlet understressed the action of the rank and file and overstressed the role of the shop stewards. Solidarity, it is alleged, constantly failed to

differentiate between workers and stewards. Underlying this criticism is, of course, the assumption that the stewards at Fisher-Bendix were totally integrated into the trade union bureaucracy. According to B.F. the march on the Admin Block and the occupation of the Boardroom were “not organized or led by the stewards”. The march and occupation are described as “spontaneous” events, led by a group of young workers. ‘We’d no idea, until it happened, that there would be an occupation that morning. It just happened spontaneously. It came out of the situation”. According to B.F., the Solidarity pamphlet “effectively denied the autonomy and selfactivity of these workers, something which Solidarity has spent much time denouncing other groups for doing”.

The second criticism is that the Solidarity pamphlet did the very opposite. It was “euphoric”. It overstressed rank and file participation during the occupation and understressed the bureaucratic manoeuvres of the union machine. To our version of what happened at Fisher-Bendix, B.F. counterpoises another reality. “All the decisions and all the interesting activity was done by the Committee. Relationships did not basically change during the occupation. There was still a passive majority and an active minority, who ran the show”. Solidarity is no longer accused of denying anyone’s autonomy. We are now accused of alleging autonomy where in fact there is none.

According to B.F. both defects in our pamphlet stem from a common source: the fact that we “are divorced from working class struggle”.

Let us deal with these criticisms one by one, bringing them down from the realm of fantasy and submitting them to a confrontation with a few hard facts.

Firstly to dispose of some red herrings. We reject the allegation that Solidarity is “mainly a pamphlet producing group”, divorced from working class struggle. We certainly produce pamphlets (which is presumably better than not producing pamphlets, and probably marginally better, i.e. of more lasting value, than producing broadsheets). But we also try to produce and propagate ideas, not just about working class struggle, but about all areas where the system is being challenged, about politics in fact. We also feel that these ideas should be coherent. In our opinion an informed and conscious working class, understanding what it wants, knowing how it will have to struggle to achieve it and aware of the obstacles (internal and external) it will have to overthrow, is an essential pre-condition for any significant social change. We hold this belief most deeply, as it is for us the basis both of meaningful struggle today and of non-manipulated, self-managed society tomorrow. And because of this we are as much concerned with the direction in which we are moving as with the movement itself. “All movement and no direction” is certainly not our motto. We are concerned with the lasting effects of what we do or say, rather than with demagogic declarations or mindless buzzing around from one dispute to another.

Secondly, did we get an accurate idea of what was going on at Fisher-Bendix? Seven comrades visited the place, two of them twice. They were experienced comrades with long records of struggle as militants, stewards and convenors. We don’t like to engage in such “prolier than thou” declamations and are only prompted to do so to refute the innacurate allegations of the B.F. letter.

Who did our comrades speak to in their search for information? It is quite untrue that they “only spoke to the Committee”. They spoke to many rank-and-file workers, in addition to stewards and to those active on some of the Committees. They spoke to workers just sitting

around, and to others playing cards or bingo. It is true – and here B.F. may have a point – that had we spoken to more workers, on more occasions, other facts may have emerged, But we preferred urgently to disseminate those facts we did get hold of (in the hope that they would further the development of the struggle itself) than to stay at home and get none of the facts (for which we would doubtless also have been criticized by B.F.).

Let us now turn to the two specific areas of B.F.'s criticism of the Solidarity pamphlet. We can imagine no better way of vindicating our view of what happened than by taking up some of the statements made by ... B.F. itself. When one is as politically confused as B.F. one doesn't worry unduly about holding and disseminating mutually contradictory views. Unfortunately they can't all be simultaneously true and some of the chickens will inevitably come home to roost.

First, was the occupation "spontaneous"? Was it decided on the spur of the moment by people who "had no idea, until it happened, that there would be an occupation that morning"? This is what B.F. alleges.

Let the B.F. Broadsheet refute the B.F. letter. In their article, "Bendix: How the workers Took Over (A Group of Workers Say How It Happened)", we are told that er the Christmas holiday "sit-ins were being discussed". So the idea of a sit-in was undo The day before the sit-in started a group of workers were discussing a demonstration to show that "the stewards were not alone in the struggle". If this revealing sentence means anything at all, it means that the stewards were contemplating action and that the groups of workers were also feeling the need for it and re planning for it.

Let us now turn to the central event: the famous march onto the Admin Block. Was it really decided only five minutes before it happened? If the march was as "spontaneous" as B.F. alleges, can they explain why, during the march, the master keys to all parts of the plant were taken from the place where they were usually kept (as we reported in our pamphlet)? Was this some kind of "spontaneous", divine foresight? Did those who "spontaneously" started the demo think of the keys ... before they even knew there was going to be an occupation of the Boardroom? Or does B.F. deny the whole episode of the keys?

We now reach the door of the Boardroom. According to the B.F. Broadsheet there was "a terrible feeling of frustration – because nobody would walk in. Suddenly Tom, probably knowing there was no choice, stepped in and the rest followed". But who was this mysterious Tom, whose hand was being thus guided by an inexorable destiny? Why has Tom got no surname? Could he possibly be one of those reactionary stewards, whom Solidarity is constantly mixing up with workers? To be more specific, could he be one Tom Staples, Treasurer of the Occupation Committee, Secretary of the Kirkby, Huyton and Prescott Trades Council, and a member of a political party for which neither B.F. nor Solidarity have much time?

Let us continue our "spontaneous" excursion with B.F. Jack Spriggs, the Works Convenor, gets up in the Boardroom. He tells the management "they had fifteen minutes to make up their minds". Was Jack really saying the first thing that passed through his head? Was he really acting on the spur of the moment? Was his statement really an impromptu utterance, not previously discussed with other stewards? Are we really to believe that Jack Spriggs had been inadvertently sucked into a demonstration led by eighteen young workers, not quite

knowing what was happening to him and what it might all lead to? 1 B.F. should really not project its own naivety onto others.

In our pamphlet we mention the systematic preparation for the sit-in. We describe how workers from Fisher-Bendix had, over a period of weeks, visited U.C.S. and Plessey's – and more recently Allis-Chalmers. We report how they had studied various types of occupation, to see what would best suit their own particular circumstances and needs. Is this true or isn't it? Would B.F. like to face our informants and tell them they were inventing all this? Had there or had there not been extensive discussions about appropriate modes of action? Are we really to believe that nobody knew the occupation was going to take place on that particular day? Anyone saying this at Bendix would be laughed out of court.

There are other strange omissions in the B.F. account of events. There is no mention of the fact that there had been a joint meeting of staff and manual workers (the/first for many a month) on the day before the occupation. Or of the fact that the workers and some of the staff in the Admin Block immediately joined the shopfloor workers, as part of a concerted plan, of action. Why are these crucial facts omitted? Could it be because they clash with B.F.'s account of how the occupation developed?

To ignore some facts and to distort others – in order to show that the FisherBendix occupation was the outcome of a purely “spontaneous” action by a group of young workers – and to assert that the stewards had nothing at all to do with it – is rather pointless. It is not going to kid any of those who took part. Are the “facts” being presented in this way in order to encourage others to act in a similar way? Is the purpose to create a myth? Such cynical manipulation of the facts reveals a basically contemptuous attitude, unfortunately quite widespread among certain sections of the “revolutionary” movement today. What is implied is that workers are too stupid to accept reality as it is and therefore have to be jogged along with injections, at appropriate time, of doses of revolutionary mythology.

Let us now turn to B.F.'s second point. Was the occupation as bureaucratically as B.F. implies? Didn't the relationship change, just a little, during the sit-in? Didn't _ thing new emerge? Is the balance sheet totally negative? Was it a dispute “just like any other”?

To ask these questions is to answer them. We presume (although we would like reassurance on this point) that B.F. would not have been interested in this dispute if had been “just like any other”. Again their own account (in their Broadsheet) refutes they say (in their letter). We are told (in the Broadsheet) that “these workers no longer leave everything to their shop stewards and the negotiators” and that they “have a new attitude to politics”. Either this is true (in which case the criticism make of Solidarity's decription of the occupation collapses). Or it is untrue (in which case they are again engaging in their little game of revolutionary myth-making. The Broadsheet claims that “women we couldn't get out with us on the nine strike are now as involved as anyone else in the occupation ... this has brought us closer together and everybody is talking about things“. (Hardly a picture of “a passive majority and an active minority”.)

We are finally told (again in the Broadsheet) that “in the last few days, at Bendix, .ers have got to know for the first time people who often worked right next to them. For the first time they are all working together themselves.” How do B.F. square this with their statement that “relationships did not basically change during the ation”. How basic is basic? If they mean that there was no revolution they are If they mean that hundreds of people didn't find

themselves doing things or thinking things they had neither done nor thought before, they are wrong. Is B.F.'s to such facts? Or is it just that they are not too concerned about such trifles as reality, coherence and consistency?

But B.F.'s muddleheadedness doesn't end there. Their Broadsheet tells us that "twenty stewards are doing nearly everything". Their letter implies that these twenty odd characters were dominating everyone of the very numerous Committees, taking every decision, miraculously getting everything endorsed, systematically denying a voice to the rank and file. If B.F. believe all this, the first prize for Utter Confusion surely go to their statement that "there weren't enough stewards". B.F. must their readers are utter morons!

We don't dispute that there were, in all probability, bureaucratic and manipulatory aspects to the behaviour of certain shop stewards at Fisher-Bendix. We are not claiming that from one day to the next people nurtured in the tradition of bureaucratic maneuvering changed their spots. In our pamphlet, written at the height of the occupation, we warned that "if occupation is pushed and manipulated by such peoby trade union officials or members of 'vanguard' type parties) the very form may result in workers being denied the right themselves to manage their own struggles. Under such circumstances occupation would not automatically result in a advanced type of struggle". But at Fisher-Bendix this was not, at that stage, the point. We were interested in what was new in Fisher-Bendix, not in what is the on denominator of so many industrial disputes today.

The point of a pamphlet like ours was to bring to other workers information them by the mass media and by the traditional revolutionary press. This information to be helpful must, of necessity, hinge on the new developments thrown up in the course of the struggle itself. If nothing more important emerges from the reading of our pamphlet than that some workers in struggle grasp the need to concentrate in their own hands as many as possible of the physical resources of the firm (i.e. the full implications of the "raid" on the Moorgate Road stores), as well as the need to involve their relatives in collective decision-taking then our pamphlet, in our opinion, will have been well worth producing. If B.F. believe that all stewards, in all circumstances, are irreversibly integrated into the trade union bureaucracy, they should say so openly in their publications. They don't. One can only conclude that they speak with one voice in their public utterances – and with another when they throw shit on other groups.

All this flows, of course, from an inability to think dialectically, to see contradictory aspects of reality at any given time, to recognize what is a developing tendency (to be encouraged, assisted and publicized) and what is a declining one (to be helped to the grave or just ignored).

In the simplistic world of B.F. everything is seen in black and white. The workers are seen as the embodiment of good (even when they talk of running the factories "efficiently", which in the context of their present consciousness means according to the norms of bourgeois cost-effectiveness). The shop stewards, on the other hand, are seen as totally integrated into the trade union bureaucracy. The fact that stewards are usually elected regularly and are revocable (whereas the trade union officials are often neither) just doesn't come into the picture. Things can't be described as they are; they must conform to models. "My mind is made up, don't confuse me with facts". For instance B.F.'s letter claims that the members of the Occupation Committee "acted in the way that good trade unionists always do and within the structures they have always known". This is both inaccurate and leads B.F. to turn a blind eye to what was really new and immensely encouraging in the Fisher-Bendix occupation,

namely the notion of mass meetings attended by wives and relatives, who in this way would be less liable to the pernicious pressures of the mass media.

Did the stewards in fact “act in the way that good trade unionists always do”?

Sit-ins bring workers from different unions together as workers. Is this really one of the traditional concerns of the trade union bureaucracy? Why does B.F. regard the stewards, also faced with the sack, as the inevitable enemies of the workers, under all circumstances? Are they not workers too, also liable to be affected by the redundancies, and also interested in struggling against them in the most efficient way possible? We have repeatedly denounced the usurpation of the function of shop steward by members of various vanguard sects. We saw no reason however to drive a wedge between stewards and men in a situation like Fisher-Bendix, where there was not much conflict of interests.

Blindness to what was new also led B.F. to underestimate the significance of the seizure of the stores from the Moorgate Road Depot, at a very early stage of the dispute. Are raids of this kind now to be regarded as routine operations, run by trade union officials? We felt such events were important and we stressed them because they show that workers are beginning to think with their heads (instead of with their balls), to plan their actions (instead of just reacting to events). Some revolutionaries could well follow the example being set.

In our pamphlet we welcomed the development of sit-ins, for which we have been systematically campaigning for many years. We also warned of their limitations. We tried to place this tactic in the context of a number of possible methods of struggle. All this is too complicated for B.F., who in their new found enthusiasm for the sitin denounce “the utter folly of strikes”. We would have enjoyed watching them expound this doctrine to the miners’ pickets, outside any large power station. This nonsense again flows from B.F.’s “all-or-none”, “one-or-the-other”, totally undifferentiated approach to real problems. We don’t consider this particularly helpful. Sure, the B.F. Broadsheet makes no great demands on those who read it. But this is for the simple reason that it makes no such demands on those who write it.

Where the confusion of B.F.’s “politics” (or rather “non-politics”) reached its zenith was in their publication – in the Broadsheet – of a “Statement from the Workpeople”. This wasn’t a statement from the workpeople at all, as anyone with an ounce of political savvy would immediately have recognized. It was a Stalinist inspired political document, signed by a number of the real local trade union bureaucrats. B.F. published it without comment. They therefore appeared to endorse what the document said. The document supports the actions of Merseyside Labour M.P.s in the House of Commons. These fakers want to call for an “enquiry” – in political terms an investigation sponsored by a government representing the interests of Capital. The “statement” then proceeded to denounce the Tories for their attitude to closures and unemployment. But it didn’t utter a squeak about massive closures and sackings under a Labour government, which also represented the interests of Capital. If all this isn’t mystification with a vengeance, what the hell is it? Solidarity is accused of not being able to distinguish between workers and shop stewards. We deny this charge, but it is certainly a less serious one than confusing the voice of the ‘workpeople’ with the farts of the local Stalinist apparatus.

There is no vacuum in politics. The “non-politics” of B.F. leads directly to the uncritical dissemination, by an allegedly revolutionary paper, of the politics of our opponents.

This leads us to discuss, in conclusion, two important areas which differentiate us from groups such as B.F.. One concerns “autonomy” and “spontaneity”. The other the difference between being a “militant” and being a “revolutionary”.

There seems to be a great deal of confusion, in the revolutionary movement, about such concepts as “autonomy” and “spontaneity”. The words are not synonymous, as is so often assumed.

Autonomous, strictly speaking, means that “which makes its own laws” and therefore, by implication, “which acts in its own interests”. An autonomous working class action is one in which workers have acted with their own, independent, class objective in mind. These objectives are totally different from the objective of “their” employers, of “their” firm, of “their” country, or of “their” union leaders. Autonomous –class action becomes possible when the working class see itself as “a class for itself” (to use Marx’s phrase) – i.e. as a class consciously, explicitly and collectively concerned with its own fate in society.

Full autonomy has both ideological and organizational components. Ideological and organizational components. Ideological autonomy denotes that one has gained as much understanding and insight as possible into the influences that mould one’s thinking. It means that one’s thinking has been freed, as much as possible, of alien class influences, of alien class values, of alien class “rationality”. To gain ideological autonomy is a difficult process. It requires that one identify the numerous residues of bourgeois thinking we all carry with us, because of the society in which we live. These are often much more powerful and deeply implanted than people imagine. The working class struggle for autonomy is the struggle to free itself of all that lingers on, in its thinking, in its habits and in its own patterns of organization, of the society it is fighting against.

For revolutionaries, to assist working class autonomy means to denounce the various mystifications that prevent the working class from achieving this kind of insight. Among such mystifications are the Leninist myth that “the working class can only achieve a trade union consciousness”, the myth that socialist consciousness has to be injected into the working class movement by middle class professional revolutionaries, the myth that Russia and China are some kind of “workers’ state”, the myth that the Labour Party is a working class party, etc., etc. To assist the development of genuine autonomy means a conscious refusal to pander to working class backwardness, to working class confusion or to working class illusions, for the sake of immediate popularity. It means consciously vaccinating oneself against the disease of “workeritis”, a condition in which everything the working class says or does, however reactionary, is miraculously endowed with transcendently positive qualities.

Organizational autonomy means the creation or development of organizations totally controlled by the workers themselves and with which they can totally identify. No such organizations exist today. At certain times and in certain places workers’ councils have approximated to this type of organization.

Revolutionaries should constantly be advocating the organizational autonomy of the working class, the breaking of all bonds which tie the working class to bodies controlled by the employers or by their state. They should denounce the stranglehold of the trade union bureaucracy on working class organization. But if such organizations are to be genuinely autonomous, revolutionaries will also have to denounce their usurpation or their manipulation

by Stalinists, Trotskyist or Maoist micro-bureaucrats. In practice this would mean explaining the real nature of the Stalinist-controlled Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions, of the SLL controlled [2](#) All Trades Unions Alliance and of similar bodies. Patiently explaining the real nature of these bureaucracies is a political task. It cannot be done by simply piling invective on particular opponents because of their ethnic background or sexual habits. These methods do not contribute to autonomous politics. On the contrary they pander to the most backward tendencies among workers.

It will be seen that autonomous action requires a high level of working class consciousness. It can take place suddenly – or on the contrary be spread out over a considerable period. It is not in the least “spontaneous”.

“Spontaneity“, on the other hand, denotes something which seems to happen without apparent cause, without obviously being the result of previous preparation. In the sense of an “effect without a cause” there is probably no such thing as “spontaneity” in politics (or in life). Human reactions are always largely determined by previous experiences.

If the person who reacts “spontaneously” is not consciously aware of why he is acting in a given way, this does not at all mean that there are no causes for his actions. It only means that the causes elude him because they are subconscious. Such subconscious drives reflect previous conditioning. From a class point of view “spontaneous” actions may be positive or negative. They may reflect tendencies to genuine autonomy or they may reflect all the prejudices of established society.

“Spontaneous” action is usually taken to mean action which breaks out without having been planned beforehand. It does not in the least follow that such an action will be in the long-term interests of workers. It could be “spontaneously” reactionary.

Of course, when there are positive “spontaneous” actions (i.e. “spontaneous” actions which assist or reflect the development of class autonomy) these should be reported fully. Of course groups of conscious militants can play an important role in triggering off crucial events. We have described this process repeatedly in our publications, whether dealing with particular industrial disputes or with larger events like the Hungarian Revolution or May 1968 in France. But one shouldn’t invent “spontaneous” actions, out of deference to some nebulous concept of “spontaneity”. And it is even less permissible to ignore real actions, because you have disagreements with those who initiated them. This history “a la carte” helps no one: tidying up reality is a fruitless pastime. Only the truth is revolutionary.

Because of our opposition to traditional (Bolshevik) types of revolutionary organisation, Solidarity is often accused by the trad revs of being advocates of “spontaneity”. [3](#) With a blissful disregard for evidence they do this, despite our constant endeavour to avoid using politically meaningless terms like “spontaneity”. B.F. reflects another kind of confusion. We are accused of denying “autonomy” to a group of workers because, in our pamphlet, we did not mention one of their allegedly “spontaneous” actions. We have argued earlier about the facts themselves. It is difficult to argue here about the ideas, because words are used without any real thought as to their meaning.

There is also much confusion in the political scene today, as to the differences between “militants” and “revolutionaries”. The main difference between them is a question of politics (we don’t mean party or institutionalized politics, but politics in the full sense of the term,

namely concern about everything that goes on around us and in particular about the relations of people to the society they wish to overthrow).

A militant is someone who sees only a part of social reality. His or her struggle confined to a limited area (industry, education, the tenants' movement, women's ration, etc.).

A revolutionary, on the other hand, seeks to develop an overall understanding (and hence an overall theory) concerning the structure of class society. He is interested in the various mechanisms which hold it together and whereby it perpetuates itself. This should lead him to examine a wide range of phenomena, including the internalization of the values of class society into his own thinking and behaviour.

A militant may be involved in a very radical struggle, say at work, and then come home and wallop his kid (or his wife) who want to play or talk, whereas he wants to the telly. He will not realize that his actions at home are in complete contradiction with his struggle at work, because he does not relate them. He does not realize relevance of his personal attitudes to a generalization and a better understanding of the meaning of his struggle. He is not aware of the necessity to place his struggle at work into the wider context of the struggle for the liberation of people in aspects of their lives and at all levels.

Similarly many women may achieve deep insight into their centuries-old situation (by both men and class society) and yet fail to perceive the significance of authoritarian relations to other areas of life. Some of the most vociferous militants of women's liberation can, for instance, consider themselves "Maoists". They can boast of the "equality of women in China" and ignore the fact that, until recently, of over a hundred members of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party there were only two women: Lin Piao's wife and Mao's. And we don't know what's happened to the former!

A revolutionary, aware of the need of this wider outlook and of integrating his experiences (and those of others) into a coherent pattern, will therefore make a more total criticism of the social and economic order. He or she will consider any form of human self-activity in struggle – be it economic, political, sexual, social or cultural – as relevant to the general struggle towards a self-managed society.

It does not follow that a revolutionary holds any truth or blueprint, nor that he or she has solved all the contradictions of his or her life, or of his or her relationships with other people. These contradictions being social cannot be solved on an individual level.

But the fundamental difference between revolutionaries and militants is that the latter will rarely be even aware that they (and everybody else) have such problems. They will often dismiss any attempt at discussing them as irrelevant to – or a "diversion" from – their particular struggles, precisely because they haven't yet (for various reasons) generalized the meaning of these struggles into a total critique of society at all levels.

We have been told that the production of historical pamphlets – or of such pamphlets as *The Crisis of Modern Society* and *The Irrational in Politics* – are "a waste of time" because they are not "activity". We have been told that work among scientists or heated arguments about ideas are a "diversion from the class struggle". We shudder to think of the type of "socialism" that would be introduced by those who feel that the subjects dealt with in these publications are "marginal" and "can be left to look after themselves". It is because of our belief that they can be rationally discussed – with industrial workers as with any other group of people, and

that this is important – that Solidarity is a political organization and not just a journal of industrial agitation. We feel that lasting effects on people’s thinking is more likely to flow from involvement in all that affects them in their everyday life, and not just from involvement in their struggles at work.

But our concept of being “revolutionaries” (as distinct from just militants) is very different from what is generally understood by the term. By “being revolutionaries” we don’t mean – as the Leninists do – belonging to some Vanguard Party, destined to lead the masses into the promised land. The Leninists consider themselves as embodying some kind of absolute, “revealed” truth, and as being the incarnation of the “historical interests of the working class”. For us, being revolutionaries only means seeing a little further than others. What we see should change, as does society itself. For us there is no such thing as an absolute truth, whether in politics or elsewhere, and the idea of a complete and final theory – embodied in the practice of some Party – is, in the modern era, nothing but a bureaucrat’s dream and, moreover, a tool helping him manipulate the oppressed. For us, revolutionaries are not an isolated elite, destined to any vanguard role. They are a product (albeit the most lucid one) of the disintegration of existing society and of the growing awareness of what it will have to be replaced by.

Heated political arguments are useful among revolutionary groups, provided they share a certain measure of understanding. Argument is difficult if one group consistently refuses to spell out its views, an attitude which itself reveals much more than it conceals.

B.F.’s sudden outburst against our coverage of the Fisher-Bendix occupation highlights this problem. We have attempted to answer their misrepresentation, point by point. But that is not enough. What prompted B.F. to launch such a caricature of a critique? Was it a difference in political outlook? To grant this would imply that B.F. had previously expressed its own political conceptions, its own “world-view”. But this is precisely what B.F. has failed to do. Nowhere, to our knowledge, has B.F. explained its reason for existing as a tendency separate from the rest of the left.

This would involve answering certain questions. For instance what does B.F. think of the shop stewards movement, of the different trade union bureaucracies, of the very concept of trade unionism, of the Labour Party, of the Communist Party and its industrial base, of the traditional groups of the Leninist left? What do they think of the various “national liberation struggles”, of Premier Castro, Che Guevara, Chairman Mao, Uncle Ho, peasant struggles, urban guerillaism, the IRA? And what about all the other areas of everyday life which express clearly the decay and instability of this system, outside of the mere economic emphasis of B.F.?

Is this not politics? If not, why not? A philistine disregard for substance is seen in this pearl, culled from their Bulletin (October 1971): ‘We want to help establish a network. But we want it to be a network of activists, who attempt to link and show the relevance of different struggles. We don’t want to send (our Bulletin) to people who aren’t prepared to do anything’. The criteria for earning B.F.’s approval is then doing ... “anything”. But what? Populist activism is based on myth, the myth which claims that working class origins themselves constitute a guarantee for being revolutionary. Such an attitude is found mainly

among impatient middle class radicals, who have half-digested socialism and are ashamed of their background. Since the trade union bureaucracy is mostly composed of people coming from the working class, some of the intellectuals infected with this kind of populism tend to confuse the bureaucracy with the class itself. Thus an informal fusion, usually ideological, occurs between the “worker-populist” and various currents which seek to reform the unions. Such a trend has already emerged, for example, in B.F.’s uncritical publication of Lessons of the Postal Strike by the Merseyside Postal Alliance. The pamphlet has good material in it, but is marred by mystifying conclusions such as “our union needs to be democratized”.

B.F.’s lack of coherence is understandable. The “worker-populist” considers that support” for “masses in struggle” is enough. Criticism of the political content of these struggles is considered divisive, sectarian or coming from “academic quarters”. The attempt is thus made to consciously castrate any revolutionary critique, based on dear theoretical concepts. B.F. attempts to drive a reactionary wedge between revolutionary workers and other revolutionaries. It does so by pandering to the worst anti-intellectual prejudices of many workers. Historically these prejudices have been whipped up by the trade union bureaucracy (the nauseating recent example of Ray Gunter is there to emphasize the point). Prejudices have also been whipped up by various political parties that have acquired a working class electorate, often with disastrous results for working people. B.F.’s anti-intellectualism isolates those numerous worker-intellectuals, within any working class, who by their own sustained efforts and persistent devotion to the liberation of their class, have long since abandoned prejudices which still haunt B.F.

If all that B.F. can offer as a political explanation of itself is recipes for collective “involvement”, certain questions still remain. On what basis will decisions be taken? What are the group’s politics? The last ten years have seen dozens of groups appear which have sought to avoid “politics” (some within the Solidarity movement itself). They have all either disappeared without leaving a trace or – more particularly in the United States – they have degenerated, and in their decrepitude become either liberal or Stalinoid “third-worldist”. “Going to the working class” is not a political programme or a critique of society. It is not even the basis for a viable group, as our “neo-Narodniks” will sooner or later discover.

B.F.’s practical activities (or those of any group) implicitly define a world-view. It is high time the supporters of B.F. sought explicitly to ascertain the views of those who founded their group. The fact that B.F.’s politics haven’t been made clear up till now leads one to suspect that a deeply manipulative game is being played, a game in the tradition of the Leninist left. The example of certain Italian groups is there for all to see.

The libertarian left in Britain has been weak in showing that conscious intervention can help make an “uncritical” mass action a more coherent and lasting one. The difference is enormous. Working people don’t live in a vacuum and part of their age-long problem is the deep cleavage between what they do and what they say they are doing. The question is not to clap from the sidelines and enter into raptures about “self-management” whenever one sees a group of workers attempting to control their own lives in living struggle. Varying degrees of “self-management” are implicit in the daily existence of working people, and become deeper and explicit in struggle, simply because no struggle can be won, even in trade union terms, without a measure of self-activity. The revolutionary dimension appears and develops when the conscious and deliberate critique of society by the working class fuses with its practical “self-activity”, reinforcing it, and in turn being nourished by the elemental drive of a class striving for full self-consciousness. It is here that groups of “pamphleteers” – yes,

“pamphleteers” like Solidarity – can and must intervene and fuse their politics with the revolutionary action of masses of people. People who just do “anything” will probably end up doing the donkey work for the reactionary tendencies in any such mass activity.

B.F. has no consistent politics, on any issue. On any particular issue, it must therefore have a whole series of formulas, copied from the whole range of left organizations in Britain and elsewhere. Thus at times it might appear to uphold the strivings of the rank and file; at others it will confuse these strivings with the actions of the trade union bureaucracy (thus consciously adopting a semi-Trotskyist stance). This “attitude” must of course extend to all areas of the group’s involvement: student milieu, “youth culture”, women’s liberation, Claimants’ Unions, community politics, etc. And, if its roots were Leninist yesterday, they might become Leninist again tomorrow. After all, if politics is just a question of “doing something” then the rest can all be bought – at bargain prices – in any revolutionary supermarket.

We have no monopoly of the truth and do not for a minute deny B.F.’s – or anyone else’s – right to be as critical as they like of Solidarity’s ideas or methods of action. We do however demand that criticisms be honest and informed – aimed at helping the movement forward – and not just ignorant gossip. We are, we confess, surprised at B.F.’s method. To disseminate “information” about the allegedly “criminal” attitude of another tendency in the movement (without having first attempted to ascertain the facts by approaching that organization directly – and while maintaining a facade of comrade relations) is not in keeping with expected norms of behaviour between libertarians. It smacks of a very different tradition. We can see no rational reason for the malevolence behind BP’s letter, which we can only construe as a hostile act. We will not be mealy-mouthed or pull our punches in answering back. Our reply however, unlike their attack, will be both political and principled. Nothing but good can come from such a confrontation of views and methods.

SOLIDARITY DISCUSSION BULLETIN, FEBRUARY 1972.

[Markyb's blog](#)

- [1.](#) As far back as December 11, 1971 *Socialist Worker* carried an interview with Jack Spriggs in which he explained how "inside the Fisher-Bendix factory a 50p levy is being built up as a fighting fund...ultimately, our main weapon will be the sit-in strike... A sit-in here will provide a focal point for a fightback against unemployment throughout Merseyside".
- [2.](#) Socialist Labour League
- [3.](#) The latest example of this nonsense is to be found in Tariq Ali's *The Coming British Revolution* (Jonathan Cape, 1972), p.143. Apparently "*Solidarity's* belief in spontaneously-generated political consciousness" leads us to "deny the need for any organization". Both the premise and the conclusion are false. The "argument", moreover, is a *non sequitur*