



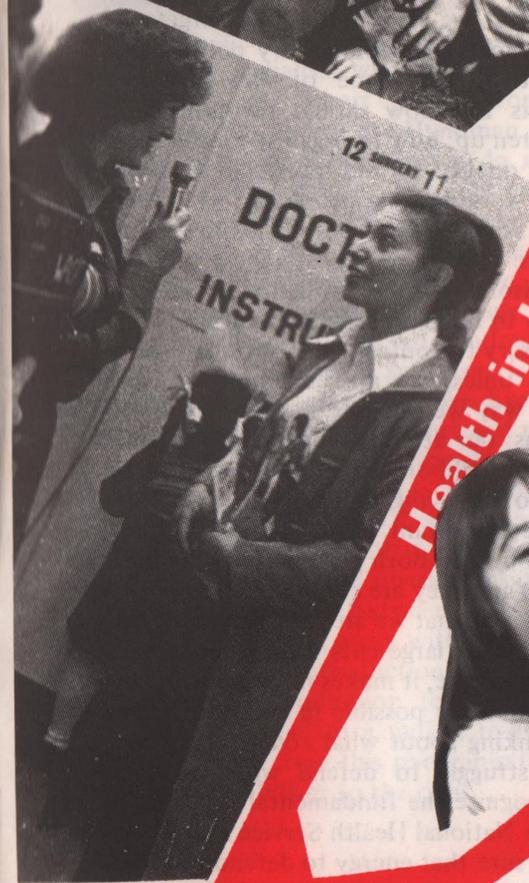
Big Flame

Revolutionary Socialism

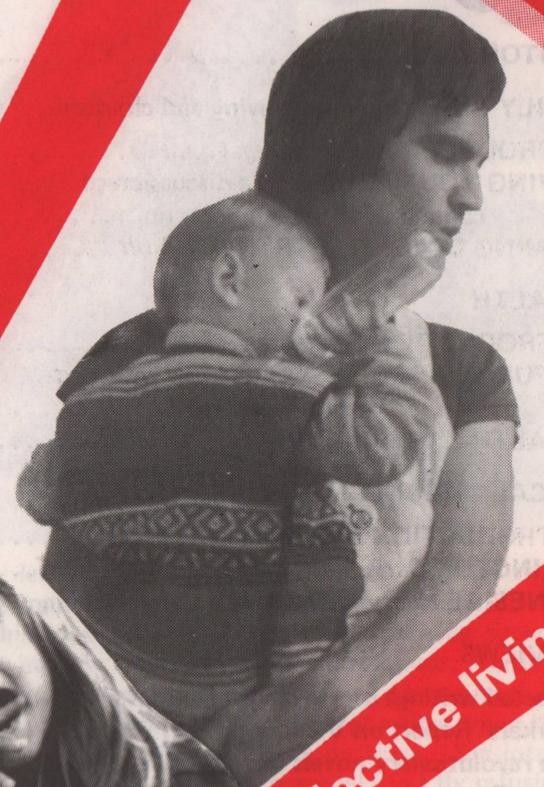
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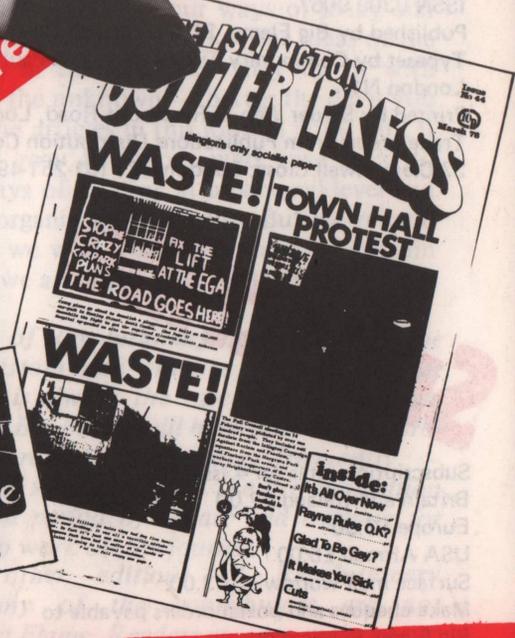
Health in London and China



Daily life, childcare



Collective living



Local organising in Islington and Tyneside

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Editorial

As the ferocious attack of the Tory government on the working class begins to bite, there is going to be a great temptation for revolutionaries to devote all their time to preparing themselves for a militant upsurge of industrial workers, in the hope that this upsurge leads to an overthrow of the present government, the restoration of a Labour government and beyond . . . Like everyone else, **Big Flame** looks forward to the prospect of the overthrow of what is, after all, an extremely reactionary government but we also remember that the working class got rid of Heath in 1974 and five years later the Tory party won an electoral landslide — a landslide that included many working class votes.

We are not saying that we have any surefire strategy for how to avoid a repetition of this black series of events, what we are saying is that in our 'turn to the class' we had better not forget the quieter, hidden facets of revolutionary politics that are the subject of this issue of *Revolutionary Socialism*. Facets like how should revolutionaries bring their children up, how to organise locally, how to improve the quality of our personal relations, how to get the working class people we work with involved in the struggle for a better health service. Certainly, we are conditioned to see these issues as faint in comparison with the brilliance of national issues — e.g. how to relate to social democracy, what strategy is necessary to confront the National Front. We believe that unless we are beginning to build socialism in the way we organise locally and in our personal relations, our attempt to make the socialist revolution will be stillborn. No doubt, we will be misinterpreted to be saying that only the local and the personal are important. What we are, in fact, saying, is that you need both perspectives (the local and the national) and they are *complementary*.*

It will be also said that we are 'utopian dreamers' and that at a time of large cuts in the standard of living of working people, it makes no sense to rabbit on about what could be possible in the future. Our point is that thinking about what *could be* can contribute to the struggle to defend what *is* — for instance, we recognise the fundamental importance of defending the National Health Service against the cuts and we are sure that energy to defend the NHS will come from the enthusiasm raised by developments like the Health Project in south London (see the interview on page 13). The knowledge of a better way of doing things in another country can also encourage the fightback here — and this is the importance of the article on health in China by Sheila Hillier.

*See for instance the recently published 'Labouring Under the Tories' for a discussion of national priorities.

One failing that most of the articles share is their inability to see the historical roots of what is being written about. Those of us who became politically active in 1968 and after seem to lack a sense of history. We seem to assume the originality of whatever we do. And when there is a setback or lull in what we are doing, we tend to over-dramatise things and declare that it has all been in vain. By not having a sense of history, we are depriving ourselves of a very powerful support — support that comes from the knowledge that we are not the first group of revolutionaries to have fought on certain issues. Over issues like the search for personal liberation and the possibility of a better life, history links us to revolutionary socialists of the 1880s like Edward Carpenter and Olive Schreiner who also tried to bring together 'the personal and the political.' Schreiner wrote in a letter to Carpenter: 'It is only in work that has no connection with the self, that we can find rest to our spirits. Life, personal life, is a great battlefield. Those who enter it and will not fight get riddled with bullets. The only thing for them is to keep out of it and have no personal life . . .'*

Utopian dreamers

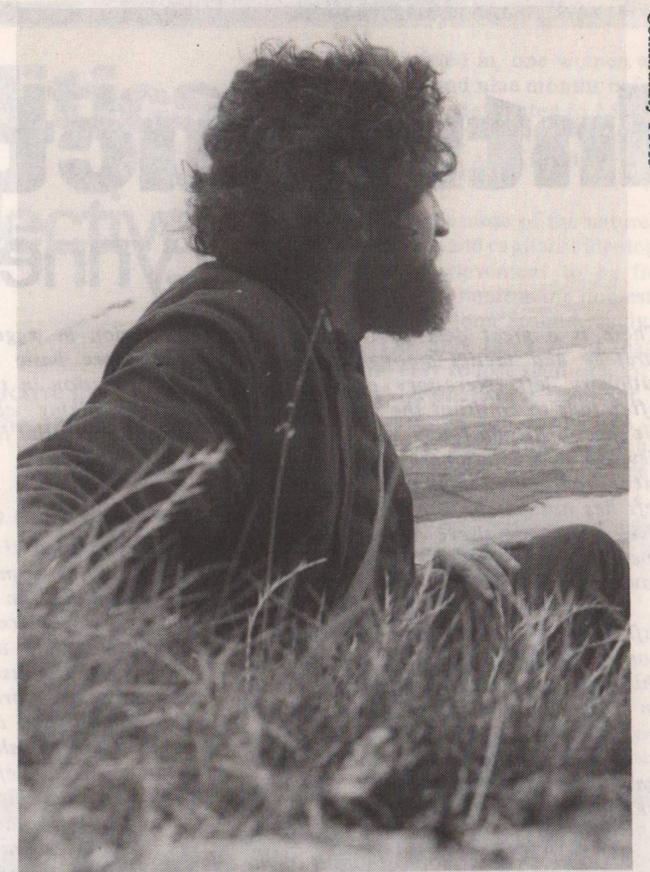
And like the 'utopian dreamers' of today, those revolutionary socialists who saw the importance of these issues got short shrift from 'scientific socialists' of the period like Hyndman, leader of the Social Democratic Federation: 'I do not want the movement to be a depository of old cranks, humanitarians, vegetarians, anti-vivisectionists and anti-vaccinationists, arty-crafties and all the rest of them. We are scientific socialists and have no room for sentimentalists. They confuse the issue.'

Perhaps, a lesson of the last hundred years of our struggle is that scientific socialism is not enough; that vision is also necessary. We live in a period when it is becoming clear to more and more working people that the way the society we live in is arranged is cruel, irrational and inefficient. But what they need convincing of is that there is a better way to organise society and that it is possible to get there. It's time that the division inside the revolutionary movement between visionaries and pragmatists was done away with. We are living in a period when the introduction of changes in the organisation of production (e.g. new technology, lasers etc.) will lead to a radical re-organisation of society. The direction this re-organisation takes can be either to the left or to the right.

Think tanks

The ruling class has long ago accepted the need for a vision of the future — at this very minute, in well-financed 'think tanks' (e.g. Rand and Hudson Institutes in the States), experts are mapping out ways of structuring the repressive, technocratic society of the 1980s. And unless we mobilise working class interest in the possibility of an alterna-

*All quotes from 'Socialism and the New Life' by Rowbotham and Weeks (Pluto Press £1.80)



tive, left-wing re-organisation, many of the right wing arguments will be accepted by default.

This idea of a better way of organising society must include issues like personal relations, relations with children and sexuality. We are discussing these issues in *Revolutionary Socialism* at a time when the right is making all the running on them. (See introduction to the section on personal life.) By refusing to get involved in the debate on these issues, the socialist movement is avoiding a confrontation on a terrain that is potentially favourable to us — there are many positive aspects in our ways of living and relating to each other. The appeal of the ideas of the 'new right' lies in the fact that they tie in with people's fear of the unknown — 'better the devil you know'. . . As the articles in this journal point out, it hasn't been all rosy for those who have tried to change their ways of relating at a personal level and their ways of organising politically. But we remain convinced that we were right to try and we remain convinced that we are right to go on trying.

With this issue of Revolutionary Socialism, we hope to begin a custom and practice of more regular publication. It is always the case that an organisation the size of Big Flame will have problems in producing a theoretical publication frequently — especially in the situation when the pre-publication period is also a period of debate and learning for those of us who work on the journal.

As with other editions of Revolutionary Socialism, many of the contributors are not members of Big Flame. Readers are very welcome to submit contributions for the next issue of RS — whose deadline is January 15th 1980.

Introduction

Lynne Segal

There is a great deal of discussion of strategy and tactics amongst the revolutionary left. Necessary as this is, it often fails to confront the main problem we face in Britain today, which is how to develop a revolutionary socialist movement from a very small popular base. The left has not yet been able to popularise the idea that there ever could be a socialist alternative to the capitalist (or soviet-type) state.

Revolutionary politics were mainly influenced by the post-war Leninist position that you couldn't change anything under capitalism, you had to build an organisation to overthrow it. And it would have to be built with similar hierarchical structures to the capitalist state. This goal dictated all the structures and strategy on the way. A criticism of this view was made by the libertarian groupings which developed in most of the advanced capitalist countries from the late 60s. They said that in these countries, as distinct from Third World countries, there would be little reason for people to join a revolutionary movement unless it brought an immediate improvement in the quality of their lives, for example through changes in their personal relationships.

Some ways in which this was theorised were as follows. A libertarian catchword was that 'you must live your politics.' The German student activist Rudi Dutschke wrote about 'the long march through the institutions', trying to build an analogy with the Chinese Communist Party's strategy of gradually setting up liberated areas. And a pamphlet from the American movement asked 'How do you fight fire? With water of course.' What all this was about was the belief that the desire to change your own life and the world about you now is an important part of building for socialism in the future. The concept of 'pre-figurative' politics has been used to describe the attempt to build socialist relations now within the movement to overthrow capitalism.

Changing ourselves

The idea that changing ourselves as a society now is an essential part of making the revolution emerged most strongly of all from the women's movement. Women knew that their subordination to men in every sphere of their lives had been ignored by the left. Marxism had always concentrated almost entirely on the exploitation of people who work for wages. But women realised that their

oppression in waged work rested on an even more basic oppression for them, their situation in the family. So women started talking about the nature of socialism and the forms of organising for it in new ways.

Sexual division of labour

They argued that there could be no liberation for women without changes in the sexual division of labour, in the home and the workplace. So the struggle for socialism had to include changes in the way in which housework and childcare as well as waged work are organised today. They understood that unless housework and childcare are shared by both men and women on the left, then most women could not participate in its activities. They also said that the Leninist party mirrored the prejudices and social hierarchies of capitalist society, of class, race, age and sexual preference. Women could not even begin to work with men, on any level of equality, without a shared battle against the ideology of sexism. An ideology which ensures that women are seen, and see themselves, in ways which allow men to dominate them. This requires that both men and women struggle to change themselves now.

Sexism

The importance of our ideological attack on sexism, and the notion of there



Community Press

Daily Life

being separate spheres for men and women, is at the moment greater than ever. For it is now, in order to solve its economic crisis, that the ruling class is attempting to strengthen the sexist aspects of bourgeois ideology which confine women to the home, in order to justify its growing attacks on the working class in general, and women in particular. So we increasingly hear, as was announced recently in the House of Lords, that 'unemployment could be solved at a stroke, if women returned to the home.'

Threats

We are now faced with threats to all of women's recent gains, restrictions on abortion facilities, the closure of family planning clinics, the closure of nurseries and playgroups, deterioration of health care, and even threats to women's rights to maternity leave. All this amounts to an attack on women's rights to waged work, if they have young children. The links between personal life and women's oppression and class exploitation are thus revealed more clearly than ever to-day.

Both libertarians and feminists were active in many struggles, particularly in the community, around housing and health and in other areas. But for obvious reasons it was on childcare and personal relationships that much of their ideas and activity focused.

The following two articles describe these ideas and activities. The first article consists of a discussion between four people, all of whom have lived in collective households. In the second article, Paul Holt, now living as a couple with his two children, is critical of what he describes as the 'Stormy Libertarian Days of Hope.'

Living Your Politics

A Discussion on Collective Living: Ten Years On

This conversation is between four people who have been active in community politics over the last ten years. They discuss the impact of libertarian ideas on collective living and childcare.

Mick: I suppose what it comes down to is it's very easy and it's quite common for a lot of political groups to have a verbal and propaganda commitment to some kind of alternative life-style which they see as integral to their politics, but when it comes to the crunch very few of those groups are able to live by that practice.

Jack: I don't think that left groups generally have had a commitment to collective living.

When you are walking, running, crawling away from what you know you can't go back to, which is the social structure handed to us by our parents' generation, what we move towards is something so unknown, so unsupported by the social structure we live in, with the whole capitalist structure working against it, that every time you get something together it is not surprising that it can easily collapse.

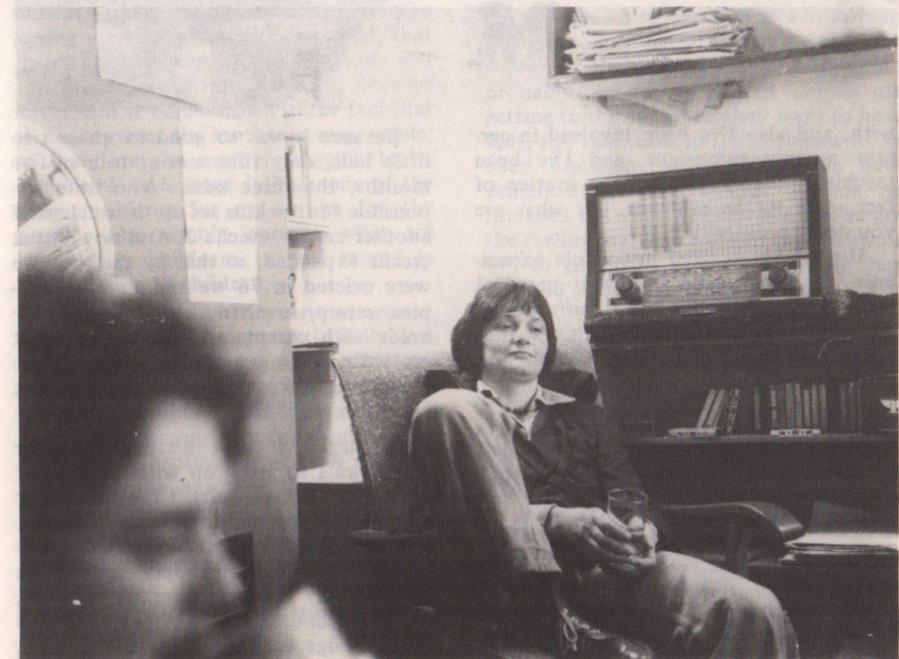
What has developed over the 10 years of the women's movement has been a bit of space made for ideas like that the working day is too long, that the sex division of labour is bad, that nurseries are good. These ideas have crept in, and some groups give more space to them than others.

Some lefties will argue that the woman left isolated at home with the small children, or going to work and using baby minders, or the man working day and night and coming home tired, and the nuclear family itself is all bad bad bad. That is pretty generally accepted. But basically what left groups have moved towards is a social change that will make living in the nuclear family a lot better. They haven't challenged this family, or tried to develop an alternative.

Mick: That's true, but there's so little clarity about what this means in practice. What seems to me to have happened is that the alternative it's bred is individualism, where you don't have commitments to anybody, where you're not dependent on anybody and nobody's dependent on you. And though you may live with other people you are only respected as an individual. That has a positive side to it, particularly for women, but it also has a negative aspect. It hides a lot of what people

other women moved in, one woman who had left her husband nine months before, and she knew that she wanted to be living in a home where we'd all help in looking after the children. Already that was a change of focus.

Jack: Yes. Because of the nature of capitalism (and capitalist ideology) it's quite convenient to be free, and without any commitments domestically; to be able to loon around madly as an activist. The only thing about that is that it's quite easy to lose sight of a lot of the 'textures' of what we're on about. As a result the introduction of children can be a problem. It can cause particular problems unless somehow you manage to



Community Press

really need. It hides basically the need for relationships and friendships.

Marge: I think that relates to people you know who are going off to have kids on their own. That's the time when you need stability and security and it's hard for people to provide the necessary stability and security.

I think some people on the left have a picture of themselves as professional revolutionaries which I feel is quite against forming any kind of alternative living situations although they may give lip service to that. What they are really doing is making a political career.

When I told the household I used to live in that I was pregnant and wanted the baby I was told it was counter-revolutionary to have children, real people were involved in the struggle out there and how could I be so selfish and individualistic.

Linda: I think for those of us trying to create alternative living situations there might be a difference between households that come together around children and households where people live together without children. In my situation, I lived with other people without children, and they were not very involved with my child. But then two

develop an ethos of live and let live, and accept that there are people who are more into interventional politics, people going to 64 meetings a week, and there are those that aren't, and you can still respect each other.

I think a lot more commitment to collective living goes on amongst people who I'd see as less political, perhaps more politically naive or reactionary.

There is a whole branch that has gone into the festivals, and quite ambitious collectives. They're into sophisticated self-sufficient living, craft work, farming and so on. The communes movement is quite impressive, and perhaps there are things that we could learn from them. Of course, they all bugger off into Wales or Scotland and no-one knows they are there and in the short run, they don't have the effect that we have in the inner city politics, which is our arena.

Marge: The story I always tell, I think it typifies the whole thing, is when I was at a bop last year, and I met this bloke in the IMG I used to know. He said what are you doing now, and I said, well, I've got a child and I'm living in a household with other kids and they go to a nursery which I'm involved



with, and also I've been involved in certain nursery campaigns, and I've been teaching nursery nurses as a matter of fact. And he he said yes, but what are you doing politically?

He totally negated my whole experience as being some irrelevant personal little thing, and what was I *really* doing, you know, about the big things that *really* matter. I think it's so myopic and so stupid.

Mick: But what does an alternative life style mean when you're talking about young kids? How can you share looking after babies? For example, if you breast feed them, how can you share that?

Marge: When the babies are very little, it's often the mother or mother plus one other who takes most of the responsibility. But we've always had other people in the house to sit and talk to about the babies, and I've never lived in a house without a baby sitting rota. And as they got bigger, we developed a creche system, where you can even out more collectively the commitment to the children.

Jack: We'd better start from the beginning. By the time Rosie (Marge's baby) was born there was already quite a complex creche existing between three or four houses near each other in Notting Hill Gate. Through accidents of housing policy, conditions in the Gate, squatting, and because there were people around not working, living on social security, we had already developed quite a complex creche, for under fives, which quite a lot of different children were able to use, for whom there was no adequate provision. But Rosie was not really wanted at the creche, as they had got out of babies, so we immediately looked around for another baby Rosie's age. Which we found. So then three of us, me, Marge and Susie were looking after two babies. This escalated, because Susie was living with her baby in such shitty conditions that she ended up living with us.

Because it was so good for these two little kids, they first met at four or five months, the three adults who were responsible for the kids set up the nucleus of another creche, creche 2. And slowly that creche expanded, so that by the time we were evicted in 76 we had a really complex set-up, involving about five households with parents and single people. It ran with meetings and rotas. Basically the kids were looked after five days a week by different groups of adults.

Marge: I think it's important for kids to grow up with each other and other adults. I taught nursery workers last year and they were all taught, as an absolute fact of current child care theory, that children only indulge in 'parallel play' until they are 2½ years old, i.e. that children do not play with and acknowledge each other until 2½ years. And that's just simply not true. Our babies would crawl up the stairs together, laugh at each other, play with toys together, and I think that is really good.

Mick: Why?

Marge: Supposing I'd had a council flat on my own. I wouldn't go so far as to say Rosie wouldn't be happy, but I'm pretty sure there'd be more pressures on our relationship. I was talking to a woman who is on her own with a child and had said to her that I was really cross and irritated with Rosie that day, and didn't want her on my lap, I just wanted my own space. I said it only happens now and then but I get worried when it does, that I'm rejecting her or something. She said to me 'I feel like that nearly all the time, 'cos we're right on top of each other, there's no escape. The way you talk about your relation to Rosie it's as though you're talking about another person who you have a close relationship with, which is sometimes up and down, sometimes difficult and sometimes close. But I don't feel that I have that space at all from my daughter. I just feel that she encroaches on my life, and I get so that I

don't want her around me at all much of the time, and I really resent her.' Well, I'd have got like that in her situation, especially after the first few months, when you tend to be really in love with the baby. But when it goes on year after year, you're stuck, and can't bloody do anything.

Linda: Yes, I always knew that I wanted help with childcare. I would get lonely and bored if I had to spend all my time at home with a child. I wanted to be able to do other things as well. So I needed to live with other people who my child related to emotionally, to give me more freedom. Even when I lived on my own, I always encouraged my child's relation to other adults. (Many mothers do not, the possessive child is often simply a reflection of the possessive mother.) And this was always successful. Other adults always did grow fond of him, and Joe would go off and stay in their houses. This did help my relationship with Joe because we seldom had to be together if I was miserable, or wanting to go out. I feel that I have never had to make any 'sacrifices' because of having a child, I have never been restricted in what I wanted to do. Joe has always been only a source of pleasure and pride to me, though I have been a single mother since he was 14 months.

Marge: The kids also experience love and relationships differently from how I did, which is basically through one person, who I couldn't bear to let go. I used to freak out if my mum went out for the night when I was little.

If Rosie hears there's a creche somewhere, she wants to go, I may say I'm not going to the meeting, and she says, 'but can't I go to the creche?'

It's also important having other people around who you can talk to about what's happening. That's the difference between collective childcare and childminders.

Mick: Isn't there a danger in some of this of simply looking for the least inconvenient way, to me, of bringing up kids, and isn't that different from having a commitment to kids built into your perception of the world?

Linda: No. Personally, I do feel that it's good to have children in your life, it's good to live in houses with children, and I feel I'm lucky to have a child. It makes a difference to how people live and how they relate to the world and each other . . .

And, as Mick says, I am also saying that it's been good for me, and it's been good for my child, to live in a more collective living situation. But, I'm not simply saying this is a more convenient way to bring up children. Looking at our children, and looking at ourselves, I am *certain* that we are living in a healthier way than most parents and children today.

Jack: Yes, I'm quite involved in the kids' nursery administration, and it's quite easy to get so structural in quite a political way about it — its

finances, its role in the community, its relationship with the Council — that you forget about what goes on from day to day. I often have a bit of a dilemma, when I have a free day, which I could really use doing overtly political things, but I usually end up spending the day at the nursery with the kids. And I find it's incredibly important to do that. It's nice to see them all again and keep in touch and it actually forces me to change my pace and my mind. I might be thinking about anything from Vietnam to China to the cuts campaign. It forces me to get into children's rhythms and think about their development, and just get kicked around a bit, and think in their sort of way. It also affects my living situation, I come home to a house of kids and that immediately makes a difference between me and single people I work with, in that they sort of rush from meeting to meeting and don't have to be anywhere at any time, except to get a leaflet out on time, whereas I have a much stronger rhythm of getting home to see the kids for a couple of hours each evening which is really important.

Mick: There seems to be a particular difficulty for men who want to look after their children, but who live in a couple situation.

We tried to live not just as a couple but to make our collective, if you like, the other people in the street. That's fine in theory. But in practice as soon as kids come into it, I ran into a big problem, which is that I can't go and talk to the other women about kids. They don't talk to me in the same way as they talk to Kathy. So you get a lot of folklore going up and down the street between the women as to how to bring up kids and that, and little technical problems that you need to hear about, but it doesn't come to me. I have to get that through Kathy, because there isn't a network of men who've been through it and know about it. So I end up feeling totally iso-

lated. I feel strange knocking on women's doors, who I don't know very well, with the baby, and they're thinking, who's this man, he's a bit odd isn't he?

It does seem to me that for a man to make a serious commitment to bringing up kids, especially when they are very young, there's a strong case for some kind of collectivisation, because it's an area you don't find ready made in the society around you.

Linda: One thing that's always worried me about collective living situations and collective childcare, is the rights of the non-parents. It is really hard for them to be confident, if they're having a relationship with the child, that their commitment to the child will actually be taken into account. Because in the end it comes down to the fact that all society sees the mother as responsible, so therefore the mother is going to be responsible. At times I think one of the main problems for us can be for the people who aren't parents who are involved in childcare to feel secure in their relation to children.

Jack: Yes, in the very last resort, between Marge and I, if it came to a showdown, she would keep control of Rosie. But in the realistic or near future, it's equal. We discuss it together and come to a consensus over it. But that's because I've been involved right from the start, and Rosie and I have an independent relationship anyway. But for most situations the third party, whether they're men or women, the single people that get involved, have to earn every bloody bit of trust, every bit of control they have.

Marge: And there's no doubt about it, you get people who suddenly get terribly enthusiastic about your kids, especially men, and six months later they're off.

Linda: But I know lots of examples of the opposite: people I've been involved with who've begun minding my children and years later, when there's no involvement between us as adults, still have a very close relationship to my child.

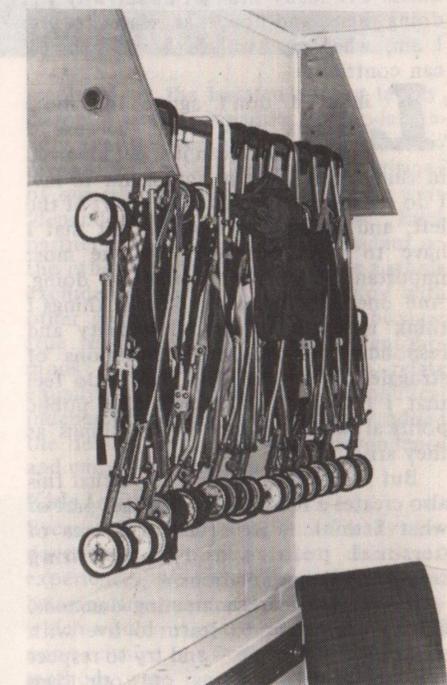
Marge: I think there has been a backlash lately on our scene. In the early 70s the pressure if you like was that everybody should be able to have multiple relationships and be terribly liberated and be bisexual if not gay, . . . now the general ethos is that basically when it comes down to it, let's face it, everyone wants to be monogamous even if they don't want to live together just as a couple. And if you actually say that you genuinely don't want that, that what you're looking for is something else, people say you're kidding yourself.

Mick: Well I think I was kidding myself.

Marge: Well I don't, I genuinely think that that isn't what I want. I find it quite oppressive that there's a lot of people around who seem to think that.

Linda: I think there can't be a socialist policy on all areas of sexual practice. That's not what we need, but instead to recognise the importance of creating caring, co-operative and sharing relations amongst ourselves, and of opposing the traditional relations in the family, through which women, children and gay people have been oppressed.

Marge: Yes, if there is a return to monogamy, in my experience one of the reasons for it — there are probably several — is that people are getting to the age when they want to have kids, and that leads to the problems we've been discussing. Also if you do have principally an individualist outlook on life then it's much easier, once you've got the feeling that you want to settle down a bit, to get into a single relationship than to build a collective one.



A collective one is much more complex, it isn't already laid on for you, you have to build your networks carefully, you have to get your houses, it's a problem getting houses big enough, it's a much more complex task and it requires a much greater commitment to the kind of caring we're talking about.

In fact it is almost inevitable that the left should have landed itself with this backlash because it hasn't built into its politics in the past a sufficiently strong commitment to *interdependence*, if you like. Maybe we could have forecast this backlash if we'd thought about it.

Big Flame Photo



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Mick: Yes. . . the more I think about this the more the ethos running through the left seems to conflict with building carefully and patiently an adequate living situation.

Linda: I think there are real tensions. But that doesn't just come from joining a left group.

Of course, there are tensions between putting time and care into collective living and being involved in any public Politics with a big P. But it wouldn't necessarily be joining a left group that creates that tension. It could come from being involved in any sort of political work which took up a lot of time.

I think in all our households there is that tension — between people who are going to put more time and energy into the house and people who are involved in a lot of politics outside the house.

Marge: I think that since I've had Rosie and lived in this household, that though I'm confused politically about a lot of things, I've developed in some way a more mature and clear politics overall.

A few years before I had Rosie I was a female version of a professional revolutionary. Now I feel I don't do things unless I've really thought about why I'm doing them, and how that relates to who I am, what my struggle is, and what I can contribute.

Linda: I don't agree. It's more complex than that, because I don't think I can just get involved in things that I see as important to me. I do see myself as essentially a part of the left, and being a part of the left that I have to work out what are the most important things we should be doing. And one of the most important things I think is trying to build left unity and responding to particular situations of struggle. So I would say that I do feel that I have to involve myself in public political work around certain things as they arise.

But at the same time, I know that this also creates a tension with another part of what I think is important, the area of personal politics and establishing supportive living situations.

There really are competing demands. Perhaps we have to learn to live with some kind of tension — and try to respect how we're all working out our own political commitments.

Marge: I wouldn't say people shouldn't be involved in public politics at all. But I think we need to have a realistic idea about what you can contribute and how that fits in with what you're doing. I used to do things out of guilt almost. I used to feel that I had to go and do this, that and the other and I felt very individually responsible for every aspect of every struggle. If I wasn't involved in Troops Out, the ANL etc. then I was somehow failing. Now I don't feel that.

Linda: But the tension is real, isn't it? I think what libertarians have realised is that to have good



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relations with each other, with your kids, your lovers and your friends, you do have to put a lot of time into that. And that does conflict with other things which you think are important for building socialism; with putting a lot of work into trade-union or anti-racist activities, or building up local contacts with people or being a part of trying to build national links or a national organisation. And it is true that they are in conflict.

Mick: But how much is the tension of our own making and need it be so acute? There was a time when we were doing all these things because we believed they were all legitimate aspects of political work. Then you got a split in the movement, in the early 70s, a division between people going off to do their own things, in a fairly personalised way — to Scotland and Wales and wherever as Jack said earlier — and others taking to 'public' political work.

As a result the potential richness of the movement which was there in the late 60s was lost. You've now got your formal left politics which is institutionalised in various organisations, and you've got a separate movement created by 'personalised' politics.



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Marge: I went to San Francisco last summer and met a lot of women who were seriously talking about collectives and combatting couple-ism and really trying to live it. Then I read something recently by a woman who'd been incredibly critical of the women's liberation movement, especially on the West Coast, saying it had moved from being a women's liberation movement, to being a women's movement, to being a women's community. Basically people building an alternative culture, which is oppositional, but that's not really going to change very much. It's not a combative political movement. And I think that's true really.

I suppose what I say, for me, is that the way I fight in a public way is slightly different. I've worked as a teacher for two years in F.E. colleges. I've been involved consistently in nursery politics, and the particular nursery that our kids go to, and I think that in a slower way I'm actually contributing more by doing that than when I used to run around being at every meeting that ever was. Obviously both are important. But when the public political thing gets to the point where the people involved aren't caring about each other, and just really stamping on each other . . . then people are totally undermined in the name of some bigger objective.

Linda: Well I do believe that we have to try to work out a flexible strategy and priorities in our struggle to build a movement against capitalism and sexism. I reject the idea that in doing that we dismiss other part of our history, all the ways we've been talking about to-night of bringing socialism into your personal life, into how you live, how you relate to your own and other people's children and to each other. But it's also true that many of my old libertarian friends do have a sort of blanket hostility to the left, as if they don't see themselves as part of it, seeing it as traditional 'male-politics', alien to and separate from them. I reject their position also.

Daily Life

Coming Down to Earth

Paul Holt

The previous conversation could only be had by that small group of people who fought their way through The Libertarian Experience of 1972-1976. The following article attempts to put that conversation in context via a critical examination of the libertarian notion of personal politics.

The beginning

The first Libertarian Newsletter appeared in August 1973, and the first national Libertarian Newsletter Conference took place in December 1973, in Leeds. It was an effort to give some national shape to the collectives and activities which had sprung up in most cities, led, for the most part, by people who had been politicised by, and sometimes taken a major role in, the events of 1968. Like the Newsletter (which ran to three 50 or 60 page editions) and like each of the subsequent conferences, it was a confusing affair.

The problem that the comrades who came to those conferences could not resolve was the contradiction between the need for some sort of national co-ordination of their political work and their desire for the complete independence (sometimes called autonomy) of the local groups. Collectively, libertarians could not resolve this contradiction, though individual libertarians did and, like myself, many of them were involved in the building of Big Flame as a national organisation.

Revolution on the agenda

In the early 1970s, the libertarian movement consisted mainly of people who had rejected both the anarchist and the International Socialist/International Marxist 'solutions' to the problem of following up the heady days of 1968. Libertarians realised that the events of May 1968 in France once again placed revolution on the agenda in the countries of Western Europe. But they also realised that it would have to be a revolution that understood the desires and expectations of a working class that had experienced the period of post-world war two reconstruction.

In her contribution to *Beyond the Fragments*,* Lynne Segal sums up the basic libertarian ideas as (1) a stress on autonomy, (2) the demand that we must live our politics now, 'pre-figuring' social relations after the revolution, (3) organising around one's own oppression, as a woman, a squatter, a tenant, a claimant or whatever and (4) a rejection of vanguards, both in terms of leadership by an organisation, and in terms of one sector of the class (the industrial workers in orthodox left thought). Libertarians



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stressed the political importance of unwaged people and of youth, and saw the revolution as a much 'bigger' process than the 'seizure of the means of production' envisaged by the straight left; at the same time, anarchism was seen as no solution.

This is not the place to go into the whole of libertarianism's relationship with the left. The topic of this article is personal life, and if the context for our discussion is libertarianism, it is clear that on this issue, as on many others, libertarian theory and practice left a lot to be desired.

Libertarian life

The experiences described in the previous conversation are typical of what many of us went through. The basic libertarian idea which runs through all of the four points listed above is that our personal social and sexual lives are at the centre of the revolutionary stage. Unlike the orthodox left, and in common with the women's and gay movements, we saw that the only revolutionary society worth having was one in which people related to each other in a radically different way. We tried to analyse the way in which men oppressed women, older people oppressed youth and children, heterosexuals oppressed gays. The revolutionary had to change him- or herself so that he or she no longer oppressed others.

Insofar as we had a theory about the source of our oppressive and self-oppressive behaviour, it was felt that the capitalist, nuclear family was the cause. Drawing from the ideas of Wilhelm Reich and R. D. Laing, it was argued that sexual repression, imposed by capital and

mediated by the isolated nuclear family, distorted our personalities so fundamentally that we were unable to make a real revolution. The key words in the critique of our relationships with our lovers were 'dependency' and 'exclusiveness.' Each partner in the couple was dependent on the other, and the relationship as a whole excluded meaningful relationships with other people. This was criticised because true revolutionaries were to be 'autonomous' individuals and were to relate equally to all comrades. To political independence and democracy, we added the demand for emotional independence and emotional democracy.

Kids to be different

Because we had been emotionally impoverished by our own childhood experiences, we had to devise methods of bringing up our own children in a way which would make them independent and non-exclusive. Collective childcare methods were introduced in which biological parents were to take their turn with other adults in looking after the children in the creche. The children would be moved between the houses involved in the creche, sleeping there each night, and be looked after during the day by a rota of adults. Meetings of the adults would determine policy for how the children should be related to. The purpose of these complicated arrangements was to avoid the situation of the

*Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism. Rowbotham, Segal and Wainwright, Newcastle Socialist Centre/Islington Community Press 1979 (to be republished by Merlin Press)

conventional nuclear family where the prejudices, neuroses and dependencies of the parents are passed on to the child. In the collective creche, the child had the benefit of the stimulation of other children, and of emotional contact with a number of adults.

All change

This arrangement for the children tied in with the ways that the adults were attempting to overcome the personal problems bred into them by their own families. Independence and non-exclusiveness were to be gained through collective living and having sexual relationships with more than one person at a time. The advice to become exclusively gay was preceded by the more liberal slogan 'Hey, hey straight or gay, try it once the other way.' The emphasis all the time was on changing oneself via a continuous process of struggle in the collective and with others in the libertarian network. The process for women was reinforced by their women's groups, and some libertarian men were also in men's groups.

Life was highly charged, and the air was thick with rumours and recriminations, break-ups and breakdowns. The 'objective' tone of the preceding description masks the torment, and leaves out the excitement of trying to break new ground. There was the enormous pleasure of finding new depths to oneself, and developing new relationships with a positive intensity which we had never known before.

As time goes by . . .

The picture today, some years later, is rather different. People have taken a number of different paths in their personal and political lives. The basic split is between those who have cut all connections with orthodox political activity, and those who haven't. In the first category, there are the people who have emphasized the use of therapy — sometimes in a collective form, sometimes individually or in pairs — as the main way of putting their personal lives in order. Others have gone even further into movements which combine eastern religions with modern psychodynamic techniques. Of those who still 'do politics', there is a division between people who join groups and those who do not.

In their personal lives, those who have rejected orthodox left politics have maintained a commitment to personal liberation to the exclusion of working for socialist revolution. Among the politicians there has been a trend towards monogamy and living as couples, often with the intention of having kids. Others still live collectively, though with far less intensity and sometimes within a monogamous relationship. Where multiple relationships still go on, it seems to be more for pleasure than for ideological purity!

The other major development since the demise of libertarianism is the growth of radical/revolutionary feminism, a movement which denies the possibility of decent relationships between men and women, demanding instead lesbianism and the exclusion of men.



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Why has it changed?

How do we account for the decline of libertarianism? First of all, it seems to me that the libertarian critique of personal life and social relationships under capitalism was, at best, incomplete. Oppressiveness does not stem simply from the relationships in the family. Not all families are as bad as our own — and very few are as tortured as those we read about in Laing and Esterson. Couple relationships do not *have* to make people exclusive — and anyway it may not be desirable to relate with complete emotional impartiality to everyone. The opposite of dependency should not be the type of independence or autonomy which amounts in practice to individualism and selfishness (yet this is what happened with many libertarians, particularly the men).

Second, the libertarian concept of political practice in personal life was individualistic and moralistic. Behind the talk of the 'real' collective practice that would overthrow capitalism, there lay a notion that what was really needed was a

supreme effort of individual will. I was very much in the junior league when it came to libertarian sex-pol, but when my lover was upset by my relationship with another woman I told her that this was simply because she had the wrong politics. Libertarianism was so strong that she half believed what I said. Like the American football teams, we argued that 'when the going gets tough, the tough get going.' It was a terrible struggle, but each of us, if we were strong enough in our personal politics, would be able to force our way through into the golden valleys of free relationships. The collective acted as a kind of group conscience, applying moral injunctions and using psychological pressure (rationalised as 'correct politics') to see that each individual carried them out.

Third, the basic cause of the libertarian decline, underlying the previous two reasons, is its neglect of any systematic reference to the material factors which affect personal life. Most of us thought of ourselves as marxists, but we somehow omitted to notice the fact that

— even if our theory and practice were right — only people like ourselves who were willing to live on the dole or able to live on private incomes would have the necessary twenty-four hours a day to devote to our personal and public politics. Similarly, though part of the new left with its 'discovery' of the young Marx, we never tried to apply concepts like alienation to our personal lives. Again, we saw history as a process which we participated in making, but we never allowed for the possibility of collectives breaking up because people wanted to change their material situation — get jobs, earn money, live more comfortably or whatever. When that occurred, and particularly when parents took their children with them, the trauma was enormous.

Our ideas had a basis in *our* material situation — education, free time and what we considered to be enough money to live on. But they were not based on the material situation of the working class, and insofar as the libertarians claimed to be developing a generally applicable revolutionary practice, we can be accused of moralism. As far as the working class was concerned, these ideas were plucked out of the sky. It certainly felt like moralism to me when I was told I shouldn't work, and if I had to work I should share my money outside of the collective household.

There isn't space here to give a full evaluation of libertarian ideas and practices about personal life. My own views are infected by the particular experiences of one city — sometimes regarded as extreme even by libertarians — and highly charged situations which I still feel guilty about. But, while I think that the brief criticisms of libertarianism made here are a valid starting point for discussion, the enormous strengths of our ideas must also be stressed.

Libertarians — especially the women — must take much of the credit for the fact that nowadays, relatively few on the left can dismiss the feminist critique of marxism and leninism. The present halting discussion of sexual politics inside some left groups, involving men as well as women, owes much to libertarian ideas of four or five years ago. The steps towards caring for and involving children, through properly run creches, community playgroups and nurseries, were pioneered by libertarians. The sometimes reluctant concession of the validity of the autonomous movements has come, not only from the sheer power of those movements, but also from the effectiveness of the political arguments used by libertarians in their critique of orthodox leninist ideas about organisation.

It is unfortunate that so few of the libertarians have been willing to develop the most positive aspects of their earlier views. Instead, they seem to have gone in various directions away from their earlier desire to find ways of organising to destroy capitalism.

Daily Life

in the number of libertarians who are abandoning the 'ultra-leftism' of their youth and joining the Labour Party: as they become more 'mature' and respectable, they feel attracted to a politics that reflects this 'maturity' and respectability.

Retaining the tradition

My own story — from student anarchism to libertarianism, to Big Flame, a mortgage, two kids and a Ford Escort — may not be one to warm your hands by. But Big Flame is at least making an effort to retain what is valid from the libertarian tradition. We want to build an organisation which is capable of playing a real part in helping the working class to smash capitalism and build communism. But we see the crucial role in building such an organisation of a theory and practice which can deal with the crisis in personal life, both those inside and outside revolutionary groups.

We realise that, as revolutionaries, we have a lot to sort out in our personal lives. Big Flame has an elected National Committee, but the organisation functions as a collective, and, like the libertarians, we put great stress on the way in which members relate to each other personally. At our Summer Schools, when many of us live together for a week, it is remarkable how thoroughly we try and act on our ideals of open, supportive and non-sexist relationships. The recognition of how far we have to go has resulted in the formation of a Sexual/Personal Politics Group, which will try and collectivise the wide experiences and ideas that we have on all these issues.

If you are sympathetic to Big Flame's general political positions, and you would like to be involved in the Sexual/Personal Politics Group, please write to the National Secretary, 217 Wavertree Road, Liverpool 7.



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The religious and the therapists have even less grip on marxism than before, or they feel that their experience proved marxism to be wrong, and just want to concentrate on the 'personal growth' side of libertarianism. Among the older revolutionary feminists are those whose experience of libertarianism and marxism has also proved totally unsatisfactory, and while they maintain a rhetoric of revolution and a notion of socialism which makes sense only to themselves, they have more in common with the inward-lookingness of early libertarianism than with the socialist movement. As to the non-party left, they have kept closest to the libertarian tradition, but pessimism has replaced the naivety of the early 1970s, and they feel that the best they can do is push for left politics in their place of work.

The great danger of rooting your politics in personal intuitions can be seen



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Health

Introduction

Sarah Martin

The following articles are about alternative views of health care. The first is an assessment of how China is coping with its immense health problems. The other article is a description of a health project in south east London, an inner city area in this country with extensive health problems, which it is trying to overcome in a new and co-operative way.

Health is one of the most important political issues confronting the socialist movement. The class you are born into determines not just your wealth, but how long you live and the kind of health you will enjoy during your life. And — as the women's movement has shown — the power of the medical profession is important because control over our bodies is ultimately one of the pre-requisites by which we will be able to take control of our own lives.

The assessment of health work in China was written after a visit to China in 1978 organised by the Socialist Medical Association and the Society for Anglo-Chinese Understanding. Western style health care is in an acute crisis in both developed and less well developed capitalist countries. Doctors trained in Western medicine, who are an elite group within capitalist society, take for granted the emphasis on curative rather than preventive medicine and the pressure for increased specialisation and restriction of medical knowledge. However, ever-increasing costs and the manifest failure to deal with current health problems, particularly cancer and cardio-vascular disease, and infant mortality in the Third World, has led many doctors to turn towards China for alternative models of health care. It quickly becomes clear that it is not just a question of a different organisation, but of a system of health care based on totally different values.

Much of this report covers familiar ground. We have included it because of its remarkable clarity in delineating the structure of health care in China. However, it also has very clear criteria for this structure which are important in our own assessment of alternative ways of providing health care. The key concepts are prevention, accessibility, integration, and decentralisation.

Under *prevention* is included such projects as mass health education, early screening for developing conditions, mass campaigns to stamp out infectious epidemics and pest-borne diseases, control over reproduction. *Accessibility* talks about the spread of clinics to reach every factory and rural commune, and more importantly, enough barefoot doctors and health workers to be present and familiar in every street and workshop and school. *Integration* refers to involvement with everyday life, so that there is no disjuncture between production and health care. *Decentralisation*, probably the concept most familiar to us, is used in China as a way of responding to local needs.

The article begs many questions over real political control, both of resources, priorities and pace. But both the obvious improvement in health care and the doubts over the extent of people's control of their health and reproduction illuminate the pitfalls for our own attempts at alternative health care in Britain.

The problems are illustrated by the work of the *Health Project*, described in two interviews with two of the original workers. One is a G.P. and the other a community health worker. They have been involved over the last three years in



a health group, based on the catchment area of a new health centre, which is trying to build people's confidence and control over their own health care. The first interview describes in some detail the workings of this project and some of the fundamental questions that are posed by this kind of work. The second takes place after two events. The first was an Open Day held by the project with other groups doing the same kind of work. The second was the absence, for three months, of the interviewees and the resultant increase in responsibility of the 'non-professional' workers in the group.

The changes that are described are slow and small, but they are fundamental to a confrontation over health in a class society. The emphasis is on collectivity; a collective unearthing of the conditions in which people become ill, and what needs to be done to change people's vulnerability. This is no simple programme of individual fitness, as propagated by the Health Education Council, but recognition of the need to change people's living and working conditions and to demystify knowledge and skill so that they can begin to feel at one with their bodies.

The more people understand their own health care the more the present emphasis on community care can be turned to our own advantage rather than used as an excuse for cuts. Community care will become a class confrontation over health and illness, not yet another burden on women at home, which they are expected to cope with without complaint.

Fighting for health has to become integrated into everyday life. Capitalism creates a contradiction for the working class, whereby it becomes impossible to work in safe conditions and earn a living. Increased overtime, productivity schemes, pollution, overcrowded housing, unemployment . . . all of these wear out members of the working class who have no control over these factors and make a mockery of the media message 'Look after yourself'.

The inbuilt sexism has to be challenged as well which puts all the responsibility for the health of the family on women, and then denies them any knowledge, so that they become reliant on the doctor as authority. Men can learn to feel that it is not a sign of weakness to worry about your health. The sexist assumption that housework is a safe and cushy number also has to be dispelled, in the face of the enormous number of accidents in the home.

Such projects are not a diversion from fighting the cuts. They can begin to show us — despite the contradictions they face — how we might combine fighting against the cuts with the struggle for a radically different kind of health service. For example, hospital occupation committees might want to think about introducing some of the lessons of the Health Project on a wider scale. In such a way we would be moving onto the offensive: restructuring the health service so that all the people who work in it and use it are involved in determining the way it operates. A health system where workers assist users to define their own health needs. Even though at the moment such experiments reflect existing hierarchical patterns by depending on the goodwill of radical doctors, they might in the long run foreshadow how these might be transcended.

Popular Health

an interview with two community health workers

Robin MacCartney



Sarah: How did you both get involved with this type of work?

Sue: Briefly from my side of it, I started work at the Community Settlement, which is a small settlement in south east London, nearly four years ago, and for me there were various reasons why I wanted to get involved in health. One was that I had a personal interest in health through the women's movement, but I suppose the main thing that made me realise immediately it would be part of my job was that a health centre was being built on the estate where we were working. It was a large anonymous building that nobody had been consulted about. We felt that it would be very unlikely that people would be able to gain access to the centre. So we were initially thinking about how we could make it more of a community resource.

The second thing for me was that when I started working on the estates, I became involved with working with women and children, and I felt that there was quite a large amount of time spent talking about being ill. I immediately began to feel that that was the way that people were able respectfully to ask for help. That being ill was quite acceptable and so people were ill quite a lot, especially if you had a number of other problems. Therefore in terms of community work and bringing people together around certain issues it might well be a catalyst for bringing people together.

John: I come from the standard medical education and I've been interested in politics for many years. I'd chosen general practice because it seemed a much more political area. People were actually living, and working in the community and that's where you had contact with them. First of all, I wanted patients to be more informed about their bodies and their illnesses. I wanted to break down the rift between professionals and patients and I wanted to get a degree of patient participation and control in our local health centre and our local health services. I wanted people to start asking for things that they wanted. But the first step seemed to be in just straightforward education, so I was interested in starting a patient group. Sue knew of group on a local estate, a mother and toddler group, so we went there and asked if they wanted to have a few sessions on health. They said yes and we just haven't stopped since. That was three years ago. The response was immediate. They were just desperate for information and what astonished me was there was also a level of dissatisfaction with doctors and dissatisfaction with the health service which came across very quickly. I had 'theoretically' realised it must be there because the health service doesn't give people what they need. Not only doesn't it give them what they need, it gives it to them in a way that they don't like either.

Health

Sue: When I started thinking about the health service it became quite clear that the health service more than any other area of our lives has become quite out of people's control, and there are certain differences in what people feel about health and what they feel about other things that affect their lives. For a start, people feel quite OK about getting angry about bad housing, about the fact that the school isn't doing what they want for their kids or the fact that social security doesn't treat you the way it should. The big problem about the health service is that even though people feel very angry about the way they're treated, they feel they shouldn't be because of what 'wonderful people' doctors are — how much they're prepared to give. It's not even realised that there's such a dependency. People have been so taken over by professional health workers. We don't even realise it.

Sarah: What kind of work has been covered by the health group?

John: It's quite an important list — kids' illnesses, the doctor's bag, vaginal discharges, cystitis, breast cancer, an overview of cancer in general, we've had long discussions about sex and violence in the home, menopause, smoking, positive health and diet. We've done some stuff on environmental health in terms of who gets sick and why people get sick.

Sue: There were a few things that came out of that. In the early stages, we found that somehow whatever we started talking about we would end up talking about depression and anxiety which was quite a constant feature in the first few months. And it was quite clear that by using a topic that people were interested in, actually having information, people were then able to discuss that and use it to talk about the things that actually worried them. The discussions in the first year were at quite an amazing level. Most of those women if you'd said, 'Do you realise this is the sort of discussion that goes on in women's consciousness raising groups?' would have been amazed, but it was.

John: The development has very slowly gone from talking about specific issues like cystitis to generalising about doctor-patient relationships. We're beginning to think about service delivery and the way the health service in the region operates.

Sue: Also to look at the health service in general, how it should be more accessible at a neighbourhood level in our particular area. And to question the whole thing about illness, and what illness is, and why we get it, and how we could be thinking more positively about health. I'm surprised at just how difficult it is to get people interested in health rather than illness.

Sarah: How has the project developed?

Sue: We found that though both John and the Health Visitor accepted that people could take control in terms of

wanting people to, they were frightened that medical mistakes might be made. I've had to work quite hard at saying that it's quite positive for people to make mistakes. That we aren't going to be talking about life and death issues, that it doesn't matter if people make mistakes.

Over the three years the health group has also written two pamphlets. One on children's illnesses, and one on breast or bottle feeding. Three public meetings have been held — one on the menopause, one on cystitis and one on smoking. We've also now made a video-tape about doctor-patient relationships.

We talked about the menopause in the group and we decided that it was something that was relevant to all women and nobody knew anything about it. That idea grew to having a public meeting. John and I then started developing that idea with the steering group to being another strand of the health project, holding public meetings which might then develop into groups around a particular subject. Hopefully it would mean that some people within those specific interest groups would get a wider interest in health and would want to link in with the project in an area which would be thinking about health in all its sides. And so the menopause meeting was held, and a group did form from that, which met for a few months.

The menopause meeting was very interesting in that we had 60 middle-aged women turn up to it, which was staggering because it was on a November evening and it was wet and cold and dark and the middle of an estate. A cystitis meeting was also held and a group has been meeting since then. The smoking group started about May 1978. That's an area of the project we would like to develop further, starting other special interest groups. The next stage will be having a day's session on health at the clinic.

Sarah: What about men in the health project?

John: That's very difficult because most of the things we do are held during the day. I think we will be getting into special interest groups that attract men more than women, things like heart disease and high blood pressure, and the smoking group has got a smattering of men in it. But on the whole, men feel very differently about their health. They're not willing to see themselves as ill or potentially ill and think that it's not really very virile to talk about yourself beyond the keep-fit weight-lifting stage.

Sue: I think women have been conditioned to feel that it's more acceptable that they are ill. Childcare in our society, in the main, is down to women and a very large percentage of people who use the health service use it for their children so it's quite natural the first links would be made with women. I don't think we need to shy away from that because I think women are important and I think

women's needs in the health service are important. They are the people who have to face up to hospital births and men don't have to face up to that sort of institutionalized experience.

Another area I'm optimistic about is our group taking out the video tape to other mother and toddler groups to talk about health. With one group that we went to the problem that came out was not so much what happened when you saw the doctor but what happened in the waiting room. You always had to wait for ages, there was nothing for your kids to do and you were really anxious about your kids getting on everybody's nerves, so by the time you got into the doctor's you were so hassled about that, there was no way you were going to talk to the doctor about what you really came about. Out of the discussion about that, one or two people said they wanted to do something about it. That for me is a step forward — from talking about health to talking about creche provision and other decisions about the way the health centre is run.

I think for things to be spreading at that level, for people to see that, with some information, (a) you need to use the service less and (b) you feel a lot better about looking after yourself, we can share those sorts of ideas. The problem about that is, if you just base a project around consciousness raising, when do people start to take action to make changes and that's the whole dilemma that we're in.

One of the things that happened because of the health project was that we were able to stop the local Family Planning Association clinic from closing. The women from the group got the information and went along to the CHC meeting and managed to persuade people against closing the clinic.

John: The cuts affect us in other ways, like health visitors. The allocations are too low and this kind of thing affects us across the board. The number of beds that they think are correct are clearly too few to be effective. The cuts have affected us in terms of district nursing staff, which is much lower than it should be, and in the difficulty of providing small, but vital things like aids in the home and the fact that the local hospital is full a lot of the time. You can't actually get patients in there because there just aren't enough beds. The throughput of patients has increased — I don't really know whether that's led to poorer patient care, but it's certainly put a greater strain on community resources and greater stress on women, and indeed men, at home too.

I think what we're trying to provide is a framework whereby the whole gamut of health issues can be explored. There is a potential for us to tackle in an organised way, both questions that relate to the way an individual patient relates to his or her individual doctor at the health centre and also we will be able to tackle



questions about where money is going in our health region. We're starting that from where people are at, what they're thinking about. At this stage, they are thinking about their illnesses and the way they relate to doctors, but all those are just beginning questions.

Sarah: How do you see the link between health work and general political change?

John: Health is such a political area — it embraces so many aspects of life. As soon as you scratch any statement about health, you come immediately across some political issue. As soon as you start looking into things like using penicillin for sore throats and why people get ill you immediately start talking about housing and diet and attitudes to going to the doctor and who makes antibiotics.

Sarah: But there is a difference between health being a political issue and how you organize to change the relations of power around health care.

John: I'm not sure how those two questions link up. At the moment there aren't many organisations that will help us to do that linking. Personally, I'd like to see stronger links with the trades council and local trade unions. We'd have to do a lot more groundwork with local unions.

Sue: I think the work we can do best is to create structures so that when we go, other people can carry on the work.

Looking at my politics in a general way, I suppose the main thing I think is wrong is that people don't have power, that they're not involved politically because they feel it's all so hopeless. Therefore any area that I work in will always be about personal struggle to regain

power and thereby make change. It's crucial that people start taking control of their own health care. I think, very generally, it's that simple.

The second part of the interview took place after an absence of three months.

Sarah: What is actually happening at the Project now? It was a collection of separate groups.

Sue: First there was the influence of the open Health Day. People involved in the project saw that there were other groups. They began wanting to involve other people. In fact, they've become almost 'evangelistic' with a particular point of view to pass on to others.

The most successful groups on that day were the practical ones, like eating a meal of health food together, doing exercises, looking in ears, taking blood pressures. These started ideas for new groups. For instance, there was a relaxation and exercise groups that started while we were away, and will start again in September. There's also going to be a self-defence group for women and girls, and a blood-pressure screening group that people will do themselves.

People's perspective changed from cut and dried ideas of illness to more positive ideas about preventive health.

Secondly, much more use was made of the video on the doctor/patient relationship. The group was invited to a Labour branch day on women, and also to a day conference in East London where they met doctors and health visitors. Going out like that on their own broke their reliance on us.

They've also been taking the video on a regular 8-weekly basis to medical

students at the local hospital, which hasn't made an awful lot of difference to the students, but has broken a lot of myths about future doctors. The group has also been taking the video to schools.

The groups that are going at the moment are the stop-smoking group, the original health group that goes out with the video, and a new planning group. In the autumn, we hope there will be a women's health group, arising out of the cystitis and menopause groups, and the other groups we mentioned before.

The health group took initiatives in inviting outside speakers while we were away, so it turned out to be a good thing that we went. The planning group has developed out of that independence, as people have realised that they can take initiatives and decisions as well as us. The planning group is open to anyone who wants to look at the project from a wider perspective, while the other groups remain for people who just want to look at particular aspects of health.

Sarah: Do you think that the project is moving outwards?

John: We found there is a need to identify the health needs and services in the area. But we have to be careful. We want to identify problems that people have, not pick out and label groups of people like 'the handicapped', 'the blacks', 'one-parent families'. We've started on various ways of doing this.

1. We've produced a leaflet with very general questions about health, which we're going to use to leaflet an estate, and then go door-knocking. There are worries about whether we're doing the social services work for them, but our attitude is very different. We aim, firstly, to get new people involved, secondly perhaps to set up a new group on this estate which contains the health centre, and thirdly to get some practical ideas for new approaches.

2. We're also doing the usual work of finding out the statistics on health needs and services, although this is actually bloody hard work!

3. We now have a representative on the Community Health Council, which is very useful for contact with the Area Health Authority. [This is the Lewisham, Lambeth and Southwark AHA which has rebelled against the government directive to cut their spending.]

4. Sue is now on the women's committee of the trades council with a particular emphasis on health. This is one way of making contact with the wider labour movement.

5. There's much more contact with health visitors. This began when the health group invited the health visitors to come and see them. The women were getting very resentful that the health visitors weren't taking any interest in this project that was taking place within their working area. Now the women from the health group are going to a mother and baby clinic at the health visitors' request to talk to the mothers there. The health

group's aim is to get suggestions for improvements and to get the women there to ask questions themselves. The health group don't want to be seen as an 'expert' or 'informed' group — and they also don't want to make life easy for the health visitors!

However, this work with the health visitors has opened up work at the health centre itself, and the job of winning over 'professional' health workers. It's become imperative to confront the other doctors at the health centre and we're going to begin by showing them the video and seeing what happens.

Sue: I'm very cautious about the response of health workers: I don't want it just to be an opportunistic reliance on patient support for health workers while cuts are threatened. The dynamic of the doctor-patient relationship has got to change as well.

Sarah: With all these new perspectives there's obviously a strain on women in the project who are being asked to do more and more work, but who aren't paid workers.

John: In this case, there is a question of what will happen to the funding for Sue's job, in that there should be local control of the money so that someone with experience of the project can take over the job. However, we're in danger of falling into the urban aid trap, which is that just as local people are getting the confidence to do these jobs, cash is being cut off from STEP, Urban Aid etc.

In general, the effect of the cuts is going to hit us harder than people think. The local hospital is definitely going to be closed. Questions about the cuts are beginning to be asked. We can go on helping people manipulate the system but eventually people get fed up with tinkering.

The question of the creche at the health centre shows some of the contradictory problems. What do we do if the Area Health Authority says there is no money but people still want a creche and want to run it themselves. This falls into the Tory ideology of self-help at no expense to the state. We've got no answers, but we are prepared to ask direct questions now about the implications of the cuts, and not just let people build up expectations. In general, we need to push for more money to go into projects like ours.

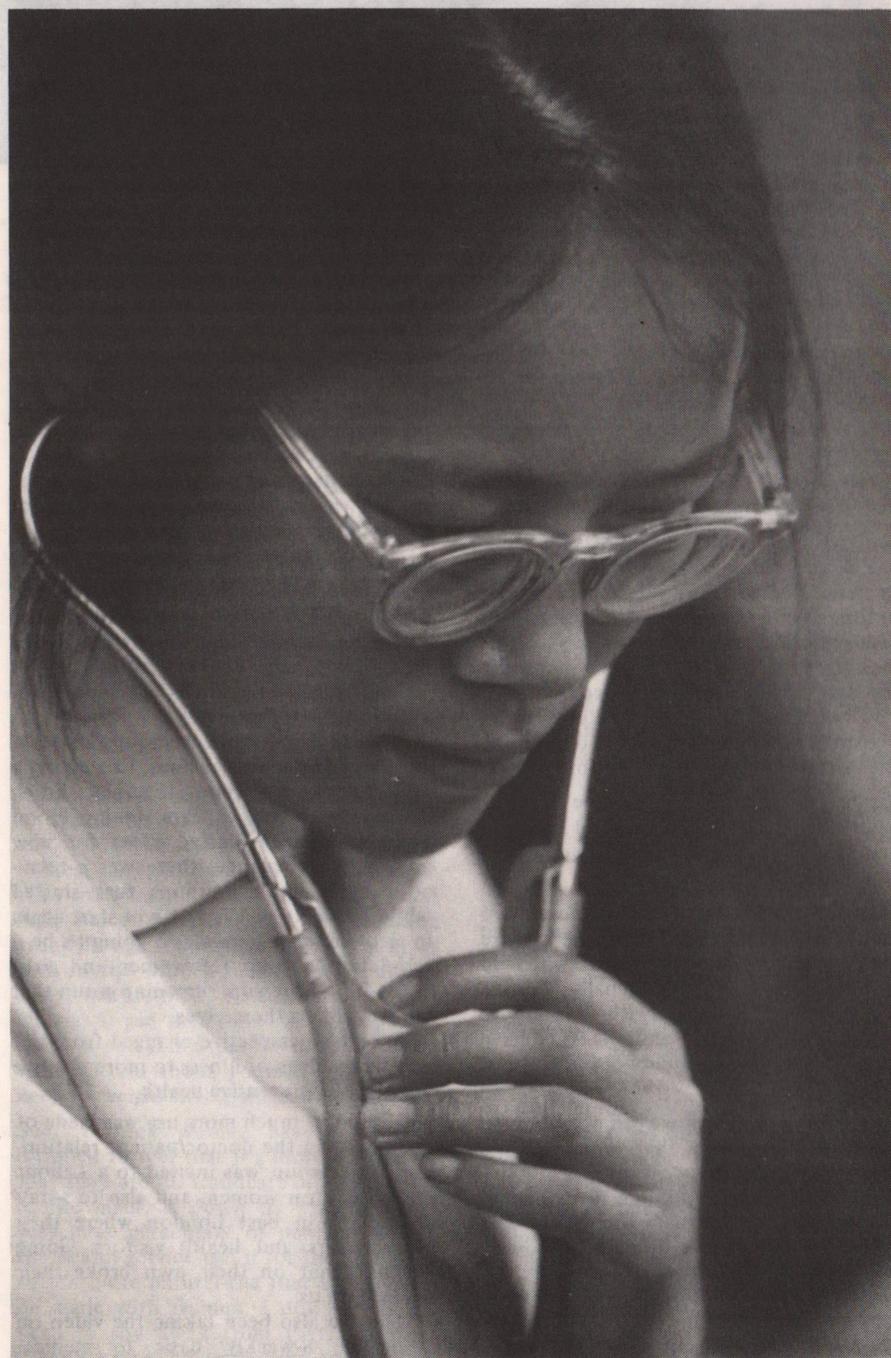
Sarah: What do you think the work of the project has meant in relation to your strength to face the cuts?

John: I feel quite freaked out that after three years the base still does not seem very strong, which is why the link with the trade union movement must be strengthened through the trades council.

Sue: I feel more optimistic. I think the groups will rise in response to the crisis. There's a lot of potential in friends and neighbours who haven't been active before.

Health Care in China

Sheila Hillier



Part one

1. Characteristics of western systems of health care

The health care systems of late capitalist countries are characterised by a number of features. They are increasingly costly; they emphasize curative medicine at the expense of prevention; the concentration on curative medicine encourages the growth of specialisation, and the restriction of basic medical knowledge to the few; as a consequence, doctors themselves form a social elite who are repaid for specialised services with high fees, status, or both. The availability of medical care tends to vary inversely with the need for it in the population served, facilities being concentrated in the wealthy suburbs of urban areas, and utilised more effectively by members of the middle class. Control is increasingly centralised in the health care bureaucracy, in the drug, insurance and medical equipment companies, and in the elite institutions which produce medical manpower.

2. Characteristics of health care systems in less developed countries

In less developed countries where two thirds of the world's population live, the grosser features of the Western model are often reproduced, partly because these form new markets for the export of Western medical technology and drugs which are accompanied by a philosophy of health organisation and model of medical training. The problems of less developed countries, such as shortages of financial and skilled manpower, huge burdens of infectious and parasitic disease, nutritional deficiencies, and the absence of basic necessities like clean drinking water remain generally undealt with. In 1964 a World Health Organisation study found Chile and Sri Lanka devoted 94.4% of the health budget not to environmental medicine but to personal health care.

3. Problems of less developed countries

The inadequacy of the health care systems of many of the less developed countries is evidenced by the low life expectancy of the population and the high rates of infant mortality. In India, for every thousand children born, 136 die. In these countries as a whole, children, who comprise 40% of the population, suffer most. Of those under four, 48,000 die out of every million every year, compared to 625/million in developed countries. The failure of third world 'health care' is fairly spectacular.

4. Problems of Western health care systems

a) cost

What is less acknowledged is the crisis of capitalist systems of health care. Expenditure on health now takes a growing share of GNP in Europe and the USA. Those systems which

propagate a lucrative system of private practice, like the USA, where 74% of the 136 billion dollars spent annually is private money, only a third of which is from prepaid insurance, promote health as a commodity. It is a commodity which is increasingly in demand as a health care/medibusiness seeks new consumers and promotes high technology 'luxury' items. The victims are not just the poor, the blacks, the Puerto Ricans who can neither afford nor utilise the health industries' products, but increasingly millions of working class people, and members of the middle class with chronic, rather than acute conditions, who try to obtain adequate health services.

In the United Kingdom, successive governments have striven to reduce the modest amount of expenditure on the NHS. Although in this country medical inflation has not reached USA standards, and the resources we do devote to health are spent relatively economically (though not fairly) the reorganisation of the health service in 1974 had as one of its main objectives the attempt to impose cost cuts effectively and dampen opposition to them in a welter of bureaucratic plans and so-called consultation mechanisms.

b) effectiveness

Perhaps a more important question than cost, however, is 'How effective is it?'. Medical science under western capitalism has produced some spectacular technological advances — life support machines, kidney machines, transplant surgery, prenatal screening, contraceptive pills, insulin and many excellent surgical techniques. As in the past however, the overall impact of medical intervention on the disease patterns of developed countries has been small. In the 19th century the provisions of decent drains saved more lives than all the efforts of doctors. In the 20th century, the same could be said of the Clean Air Act.

The health care systems have done little to increase life expectancy, especially that of working class people, and have failed to combat the two major health problems of developed countries — cancer and heart disease. In addition, mental and psychosomatic diseases, addictions to alcohol and tobacco, venereal disease, and occupational illness, are endemic and epidemic in capitalist societies.

In fact the system 'blames the victim', and continues to expose workers and their families to an enormous variety of environmental carcinogens.

This review of the health care systems of the developed capitalist countries and the less developed countries leads us to certain inevitable conclusions. Although the Western health care systems vary, the most important difference being the degree to which parts of the system are nationalised, capitalism either dominates or significantly invades them, to a degree which renders them less useful to the mass of people in these countries. The lack of relevance of the Western model for developing countries is clear. It is a new type of imperialism. It sets for developing countries health care styles which are completely ill-suited to their medical, economic and social systems, and happily profits from supplying the needs it creates.

Part two

Health care in the People's Republic of China

In its thirty years of existence, the People's Republic of China has developed a model of health care which has produced visible success. This poor and populous country has developed an alternative way of delivering health care which seriously challenges that of other poor countries, and which offers many lessons to the rich ones. Accounts of the Chinese health care system have either tended to uncritically admire everything that was presented as evidence, or have concentrated on reproducing the myriads of out-of-context statistics which Chinese sources have made available. However

enough evidence is appearing for some evaluation to take place.

Briefly, the chief features of the Chinese health care system are these — it places an emphasis on care for the rural areas; it seeks to make the health service accessible to all; it emphasises prevention; it is organised decentrally; it has initiated new styles of health worker; it has used the existing knowledge and manpower resources of traditional practitioners and tried to integrate Chinese and Western medicine; it encourages mass participation in health activities. It is clear that these general features, even allowing for the local differences and conflicts that exist, contrast sharply with the other systems described in the first section.

Antecedents of the present system

1. Traditional Chinese health care

Traditional Chinese medicine influenced the future development of health care in three ways; it represented a coherent world view, which saw health as something to be continually maintained in the ordinary structures of daily life; prevention was part of this. It was accepted that there should be state regulation of medical practice and state responsibility for health care provision. It emphasised the efficacy of locally grown plants and herbs and animal materials, compiling a vast pharmacopeia which could be utilised without a large pharmaceutical industry.

2. Western medicine

Western medicine made little impact in China until the nineteenth century, when medical missionaries visited the country, using their medical knowledge as a means of establishing themselves. The missionaries established several medical schools, the most famous of which was the Peking Union Medical College which trained an elite of medical practitioners, many of whom though now in their seventies, are still practising in China. Rockefeller money built the College as a vehicle for conveying a 'scientific rational philosophy' to China.

The Western influence produced a modest public health programme and a hospital system, a conflict between those doctors of the traditional school and those trained in Western medicine which still exists today and periodically surfaces in the Chinese press, and an elite who were reluctant to abandon their positions of power in the health service when the communists took over in 1949.

3. Red base medicine

In the 1930's and 40's, during the setting up of the Jiangsi Soviet and the subsequent Long March to Yanan, the Communist Party itself evolved specific methods of dealing with sickness, disease, and the wounded. In the anti-Japanese base areas short basic training of doctors, environmental hygiene (maintained by mobilising all personnel) and the use of cheap, readily available traditional remedies produced a model of health care which would be extolled by Mao Zedong until his death.

4. The legacy of disease

Many observers have described in horrifying detail the state of health of the population in towns and cities during the years before 1949. Although comprehensive health care statistics in the pre-Revolutionary period are difficult to come by, what figures there are suggest a terrible burden of infectious and parasitic disease. By the 1940's the situation had worsened and by 1949 was worse still. 30% of children died before the age of 5, and 11 out of every thousand mothers died in childbirth.

At the time of the 1948 revolution there were an estimated 16,000 qualified medical doctors in China, of whom 75% were concentrated in the main towns of the six coastal provinces; this meant about one doctor for every 25,000

50,000 people. Hospital facilities outside the main towns were virtually non-existent. The antecedents described above have played an important role in the present form of the system.

Characteristics of the present health care system

1. Prevention

The philosophy of prevention was spelled out at the first National Health Conference in 1950. It was stated as being the major health objective, and mass participation of the population to bring it about was stressed. At the same time it was stated that the principle aim of health work is to ensure agricultural and industrial production. The link between health and industrial production has received varying emphasis over the last 30 years. Until about the early 1960's it was prominent, but during the period prior to the Cultural Revolution it was played down. It re-appeared occasionally during the years 1967-9, usually emphasising the importance of health care to the peasantry engaged in agricultural production, but disappeared until firmly restated at the 1978 Health conference when it was reasserted as an important factor in achieving the 'four modernisations'.



It was suggested that co-operative work on projects helped to raise socialist consciousness, and prepared the way for the rural cooperatives and commune formation. The Communist Party organisation demonstrated its ability to mobilise large numbers of people without forcible coercion, using discussion, propaganda and grassroots activists.

The 'mass line' was less successful with doctors. The medical profession in China was not interested in preventive work on a mass scale. Indeed, the whole responsibility for the eradication of schistosomiasis was transferred from the Ministry of Health to a lay group with direct responsibility to the Politburo. In general university trained doctors preferred to work in urban hospitals, and indeed there was plenty to keep them busy. In 1960 Canton's general hospitals pioneered a 24 hour service and there have been many struggles since to get the profession to extend their working hours. Only the political upheavals of the Cultural Revolution forced doctors to move from the cities to play an important role in preventive and curative work in the countryside.

As well as the difficulty of involving professionals, there were other problems. Many cadres, wishing to fulfill production plans and quotas, found the additional burden of organising health campaigns too much to cope with. Peasants themselves were sometimes inclined to see the snail clearing exercises as interfering with co-operative agricultural production or work on their private plots. During periods of political upheaval, the prevention targets were not reached. It proved more difficult to mobilise people after the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962), and during the Cultural Revolution (1966-69). During the mid-seventies, health campaigns (supposed to be held bi- or tri-annually) lapsed. Indeed one of the charges against the Gang of Four was that they interfered with public health work.

a) Parasitic and infectious disease control

i) medical activities

During the 1950's doctors and medical assistants set up an intensive programme of inoculation and tuberculosis prevention. As a result of an impressive organisation of health work, smallpox plague and cholera were virtually eliminated by 1960. Mass chest X-ray campaigns for the early detection of TB were designed as part of a preventive system. In these diseases, control followed the conventional Western model, expanded to deal with enormous numbers. By 1958, the mortality rate for TB was 46/100,000 compared with 230/100,000 in 1948. Soviet doctors often formed part of the teams which toured the countryside.

ii) mass activity

The Chinese innovation in health care was the mass activities which were the basis of the Patriotic Health Campaign of the fifties. These still continue today, especially in the big cities and coastal provinces. Using the people's fears about the effects of US germ warfare in Korea, water supplies and sanitation were improved, and methods of composting night soil (human faeces, the traditional manure in Chinese agriculture), to remove parasitic eggs, were instituted. The campaign against the 'four pests' (rats, flies, mosquitoes and bedbugs) began. 'Adult flies were pursued with fly swatters wielded with zeal, while unsanitary places where eggs might be laid and hatched into larvae were cleaned.' Millions of people were mobilised in these campaigns. Led by local cadres and reinforced by the Army, each lane, street and courtyard in every town would compete to produce enormous quantities of dead flies and rats, to fumigate premises for mosquitoes and clear the filthy ditch water that was their breeding ground.

The involvement of manpower was impressive. In Anhui province 1.5 million people devoted 20 million work days to the removal and slaughter of the snail which carries the parasite that causes schistosomiasis (snail fever). The entire working population of communes took part in 'shock' attacks to 'clean up' and rebuild.

iii) integration

The other main aspect of prevention was that it should be integrated as far as possible with production. Thus peasants engaged in massive irrigation schemes were also killing and burying the snails; they dug away infected earth from river banks and buried the snails six inches deep to kill them.

iv) health education

At the same time, extensive programmes of health education were launched; these taught people the germ theory of disease. Slide shows, pictures, songs and folk tales were all used to underline the importance of hygienic practices, and the need to eradicate pests.

v) evaluation

There is no doubt that the health campaigns, made possible by mass activity had, and continue to have, an effect. The labour-intensive model, with its ideology of the 'mass line' has many economic advantages in a poor country. Human labour — China's largest natural resource — produced widespread environmental changes at little financial cost.

Labour-intensive programmes require a degree of political stability, detailed organisation and propaganda support that have not always been present over the last thirty years in China. It is interesting to note that the campaigns have undergone a change, and the more recent ones stress the involvement of those in service industries and non-productive sectors of the economy. Teachers, schoolchildren, students, and office workers are more likely to be called on to kill rats and fumigate buildings than factory workers. The PLA and Peoples Militia do much cleaning and rebuilding, and the basic force of 3 million 'sanitarians' (part time health workers) coordinate local activities rather than cadres. Preventive injections and immunisations are now administered by barefoot doctors of whom there are 2.8 million. This and the care of mothers and children is now their main task,

which they have taken over from the small numbers of university-trained doctors.

b) Other preventive services

The care of women and children has always been a priority. Maternal mortality rates have declined steadily and perinatal and infant mortality rates in large cities like Peking and Shanghai are often superior to those of Western countries.

Low perinatal mortality (a better index of medical care than infant mortality which is a combination of medical care plus social standards) is due to: few illegitimate births, which reflects the strong sanctions on premarital sexual experience, few births to women under 20 and over 40 (the promoted 'ideal age' for women to marry is 25), fewer multiple pregnancies (because of the highly organised birth control programme), and spaced births.

Antenatal care is well organised and given routinely in a neighbourhood clinic (in town) or in the brigade health station (in the commune). Women are visited during pregnancy, by barefoot doctors, and the aim is to take antenatal care to the woman either in her factory or neighbourhood, rather than requiring her to seek out care at a clinic, as in the UK.

c) Population control

The population policy has undergone changes since the days of the Great Leap Forward when population growth was encouraged. The present population is estimated at just under one billion. All forms of contraceptive are used and they are free and easily available to married people. Low dosage pills, which have less risk of side effects are preferred, and abortion by vacuum extraction (the safest method of abortion) is readily given in cases of unwanted pregnancy. Couples are encouraged to marry late and have two or one child. A strict check is kept on contraceptive practice, and many Westerners are scandalised to see the records of contraceptive use in the locality publicly displayed in the neighbourhood clinic. The



aim has been to reduce the burth rate to 1%. 8 million fewer babies were born in 1978 compared with 1971. In the big cities the birth rate is down to 1%, but the rural areas still have more births. 1977 saw the transference of responsibility for family planning move from the Ministry of Health to the Politburo; the Minister was sacked, and there are signs that a switch in policy has been envisaged. In the past the positive economic and health benefits of two children were emphasised. The latest pronouncements describe sanctions against those couples having a third child and very strong benefit incentives for those who only have one. A 'male pill' has been tested, and numbers of portable aspirators for use in the countryside have been produced.

There are signs too of a backlash against the population policy, with wallposters accusing Deng Xiaping of coercive methods, 'married men are being forced to take drugs which damage their physical functions, pregnant women are being forced to have abortions'. These suggest that the drive to

d) Cancer screening

Apart from infectious disease, cancer is the main killing disease in China. A central programme to discover the cause was set up as a national priority in 1978, and reinstated university doctors were given this as one of the main research tasks. Cancers of the nose and throat, gullet, stomach, liver and cervix are major causes of death. Where epidemiology has shown a concentration of these cases, mass screening programmes have been set up. Whole populations are screened using simple, cheap diagnostic techniques which can be administered by medical auxiliaries (the barefoot doctors). Over the past 15 years in Shanghai the entire married female population under 45 has been screened for cervical cancer. These screening programmes, particularly that for liver cancer which identified minute growths, have been most important in the early detection of the disease, with impressive cure rates from early surgery.

It is important to stress that mass discussion and education programmes have been instrumental in overcoming fear and reluctance to be screened. In Western countries, cervical screening is very much an individual decision which middle class women are more likely to take, and in general cancer screening programmes are not undertaken because of their cost, and the fear of discovering fatal disease, although studies have shown the benefits of mass screening for cervical cancer.

Accessibility and decentralisation

a) Organisation

The basis of all preventive and curative programmes in China is accessibility. Every factory has a rudimentary clinic, every workshop a volunteer health worker. Responsibility for primary care lies in the hands of part time volunteers and barefoot doctors, who staff factory workshops and sections, and production brigade health stations. There will usually be 10 of these at this level, caring for about 200 households of 1500 people. At production team level (20-40 households) there will be 3 or 4 barefoot doctors.

Each of China's 50,000 communes has a hospital or clinic, which can be a simple affair, with a couple of beds and rudimentary equipment, or on richer communes a 20-bedded hospital offering a wide range of services. The health care on the communes is financed by the co-operative medical fund, towards which each person pays 1 or 2 yuan a year (a Yuan equals about 35 pence, but rural incomes average 150Y per annum). County hospitals, where more complex cases are sent, are state financed. Every one of the 2000 counties has one. In the cities, the local level of health care is at the street or lane clinic and cases are referred upwards for treatment to district hospitals. Big teaching hospitals in Peking, Shanghai and Canton resemble their Western counterparts both in the kind of care they give and the level of trained staff, equipment and technology they possess.

b) Decentralisation

Decentralisation implies making local levels self-financing and self-reliant as far as possible, and reducing the need for referrals to large city hospitals. It implies a degree of autonomy at the local level to allocate resources as it wishes, but there has been a trend towards requests by communes for greater handouts from regional funds to keep their services going.

An examination of evidence shows that some major policies were initiated and directed by the centre — the training of barefoot doctors, the initiation of the co-operative medical service, the war on schistosomiasis, the birth control programme.

c) The Cultural Revolution in health care

Perhaps the major assault on the policy-making process in health care came from Mao Zedong himself. After bureaucratic retrenchment in the early 60's, he saw radical

innovations in health care vanishing with the growth of the party bureaucracy. Western medicine was being promoted at the expense of traditional medicine, rural health care programmes folded, 'middle-level' medical schools collapsed. 80% of the health care budget went on the towns. The medical schools were staffed with the children of the bourgeoisie. He summed up the discontent of the rural disadvantaged in his famous directive of June 26th 1965.

'Tell the Ministry of Public Health that it only works for 15% of the total population of the country and that 15% is composed mainly of gentlemen, while the broad masses do not get any medical treatment. The Ministry of Public Health is not a Ministry of Health for the People so why not change its name to the Ministry of Urban Health or the Ministry of Gentlemen's Health. In medical and health work put the stress on rural areas'.

i) mobile medical teams

In the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution, mobile medical teams of urban doctors were sent to the countryside. Medical schools were closed, and students graduated after only a few months and were sent to work in the rural areas. The Ministry of Health was attacked by Red Guards and all its ministers dismissed.

ii) 'barefoot' doctors

The major innovation in health care of the Cultural Revolution was the wholesale training of 'barefoot' doctors. These were peasants or middle-school graduates who, after a short 3 or 6 month training, formed the backbone of health care in the rural clinics, and at primary level in the towns. Their exploits and superior diagnostic efforts were much praised by the media up to the early 70's when a more sanguine view suggested that many needed to improve their skills. Deng Xiaoping was among those suggesting that the barefoot doctors needed to move from 'being barefoot to straw sandals, cloth shoes and leather shoes', suggesting an improved level of training standards. This view was often shared by the peasantry who paid barefoot doctors by crediting them with work points and wanted value for money. Some barefoot doctors themselves often found the combination of agricultural and medical work arduous; others fell victim to 'wanting to be city doctors in white coats. They bought large volumes costing 9 or 10 yuan and walked round the village showing off'.

Despite some problems, however, the barefoot doctors have proved a good solution to the problem of cheap, accessible health care. Problems of quality of care are being rectified. Barefoot doctors now receive priority in admission to medical school, and it is clear that they will be of major importance in health care provision for the foreseeable future. Barefoot doctors practise the techniques of traditional medicine using acupuncture and low-cost plant drugs, usually manufactured locally. The Barefoot Doctors' Handbook shows the degree to which primary health care, at least, is dominated by traditional medicine.

d) The fall of the Gang of Four

Recent political changes in the Peoples Republic of China have meant changes in the health care system, although the fundamental objectives remain unaltered. A more strongly directive element has crept into health care policy and two Ministers of Health have been sacked in the last two years. Population planning is now subject to stronger Party controls, and university medical education has been extended to five years, dispensing with the 3 year curriculum of the early seventies. Fundamentally, however, a strong infrastructure of health care has been built and stabilised. Inequalities exist between rural and urban areas, but what looks like a devolution of responsibility from the centre to the Regions in the provision of health care means that decisions about resources can be made at this level, ensuring that the disparity between Peking and the rich coastal cities and the rest of the country can be debated at the Regional level as a quasi-federalism emerges.



3. Conclusion

This review of the Chinese health care system has attempted to describe the ways it differs from that of the West and of less developed countries and to explain some of the political and historical reasons for this contrast. Despite certain disadvantages, on a number of criteria, the system measures up very well.

a) Efficiency

The shifting nature of the Chinese political system makes long-term planning difficult, but on the other hand, the health care system is inexpensive and local financing makes for local monitoring and control of resources. Scarce medical resources are used well and the labour-intensive model, along with the preventive health campaigns, has provided a low-cost solution to the problem of environmental hygiene.

b) Effectiveness

Major infections and parasitic diseases, with the exception of schistosomiasis, have been eradicated, or brought under control. Mortality rates have lowered dramatically, and life expectancy has increased. Infant mortality rates have dropped and in the large cities compare and occasionally surpass those of advanced countries. Inequalities exist between the health status of the major coastal cities and the rural hinterland, but these appear to be narrowing. Surgical techniques like limb re-attachment, and screening techniques for cancer prevention have enabled the treatment of patients, who in the West would have been given up as hopeless.

c) Acceptability

The use of deprofessionalised health workers, and the involvement of lay workers in the management and delivery of their own health care has meant a high level of acceptability of the service. The use of ordinary men and women has meant

that screening programmes, which often arouse resistance in groups at risk, have been possible. The use of traditional medicine and attempts to combine it with Western medicine have been welcomed by most people, although there are reports of the rejection of the former, especially by Western-trained doctors, and indulgence in 'superstitious practices' for profit by lay healers. Barefoot doctors have also been criticised for their youth and lack of skill

d) Accessibility

An admirable level of accessibility has been achieved by decentralisation thus making rudimentary health care available in the school, college, workshop or field. The problem is therefore one of keeping the system going at the local level. A few bad harvests can wipe out the funds of the co-operative medical service; standards of care may vary, although it is argued that the standard of local care can be maintained by local financing.

What one sees in China is still far from perfect; it is an evolving system, with variable progress, which has enabled 'the masses to rise and free themselves from illiteracy, superstition and unhygienic habits' and to live longer and healthier lives.

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Local Organising

Introduction Dave Musson

The Tyneside Socialist Centre and the Community Press and Socialist Centre in Islington are similar projects in the sense that both are trying to create a local forum and network for socialist activity and propaganda. They both consider struggles in the community for better services (or to defend the ones that exist), and local activity against racism and fascism and for abortion to be as important as industrial workplace struggles. They share a belief in the need for non-sectarian clubs in which people from all areas of struggle can meet, to discuss, to learn and be entertained. So in many ways they cut across the organisations of the left, drawing support from members of different political groups as well as independent socialists.

Political economy

But they are far from being duplicates of one another as the background and pre-occupations of the two articles show. What are these differences? First of all it is clear that the political economy of the area – its traditions, struggles and the social and economic structure of the area shapes the activities, class composition and structure of the Centres. On Tyneside, for example, there is a stronger, more homogeneous working class, based on the shipbuilding industry, currently involved in fighting closures and redundancies. Islington on the other hand is an inner city area where there is little large scale industry or employment, an area where there has been a continuous physical elimination of the working class characteristic of many inner city areas. Into this vacuum have moved an ex-student left as well as more bourgeois professional people keen to take over working class houses. The political economy of an area, thus creates a political dynamic which is reflected in the perspectives, demands and practice of the left in the area. On Tyneside there is a much closer relationship between the Socialist Centre and the Bookshop and the local labour movement, trades council and shop stewards committees, while in Islington the Community Press serves and is linked to community struggles, cuts campaigns and more libertarian politics.

Of course these differences also reflect the background of the groups, and how they came into being. The Community Press in Islington traces its (short) history to the libertarian politics of the late 60s and early 70s; while the Tyneside centre

is made up of a hotch potch of individuals of different class background, some active in Trade Unions, some not; some members of political organisations, some ex-members etc. As such the Community Press probably reflects certain political projects and priorities more clearly, rather than just being a loose alliance of activists in the area. Reacting against the 'interventionism' of the traditional left, libertarians wanted to create a political practice that was based on people organising around their own oppression – be they women, tenants, blacks, claimants, students or whoever. In their adoption of the new politics of '68, they rejected both traditional political activity based on the workplace, trade unions etc. and the vanguardist leadership of the organised far left.

The Islington Gutter Press is still going after 60 issues, and the Community Press provides vital printing services to all sorts of groups and campaigns. That in itself is a significant achievement; and in marked contrast to much on the left which is here today and gone tomorrow. However, while widening the range of political action and shifting the emphasis of much political thinking, the notion of organising around your own oppression can leave people isolated and unaware of national and international developments that can have a big effect on the issue on which they are campaigning locally. It can also leave them unable to develop a more generalised politics where people see themselves within a general working class political struggle for power.

Candid

For the moment it is probably too early to say how viable these particular projects are. Both pieces are quite candid about the day to day problems of administration and it is, possibly, easy to exaggerate their stability and ability to consolidate political gains and advances, particularly in the present political climate when there are a growing number of attacks, both ideological and financial, by Tory councils on local community groups.

These local political projects cannot be seen as an alternative to the more traditional national organisations. But a national revolutionary organisation that hopes to grow and develop must take these local projects into consideration.

Islington Chris Whitbread

Islington Gutter Press, a radical local paper, and Community Press, an open print workshop, were both started in 1972 in North London. To sketch their history and point to a few lessons and problems is the aim of this article.

Print technology

Ten years ago – in 1969 – the local left press hardly existed. Now, there are a number of socialist/left papers and presses. Why? Partly for technical reasons. The possibility of the new kind of print shop, and the new kind of publication, has been created by developments in print technology. Some call this a de-skilling process – I find this less clear, but at any rate let's say it has increased the accessibility of printing. The technology of printed communications seems to have been moving in two opposite directions: centralising and decentralising. At one end of the scale, you have very expensive equipment capable of making up pages

electronically and transmitting them by wire, and printing thousands of copies faster than ever before. At the other end, you have the situation where a paper can be produced by an informal group of beginners with £1,000 worth of equipment in the basement of a squat.

As for political reasons, it's harder to see the countrywide pattern. But what has inspired the enterprise locally is in part disillusionment with the 'traditional' left groups and their ways of organising, together with a wish to make a contribution to building an anti-capitalist, socialist movement.

The local situation

To analyse the political situation over a period of years, even in a small area like Islington (a London borough of 150,000-odd people) is difficult. When the Gutter Press started, we didn't know too much about the area – a complex and changing one with no real identity, in which people come and go a lot and probably most people are 'immigrants' from other parts of the country or the world.

Islington is part of the 'inner-city' area of London, from which lots of people – and firms – have moved out in recent years. It's been mainly manufacturing

firms that have been moving out, and this has led to several sit-ins over the years, all of which have failed. The pattern of the area is that the big employers are in the public sector, i.e. the Post Office, railways, London Transport, and the local council. Private employment is mainly in small firms.

Islington has more than its fair share of educated radicals and is a fertile area for local pressure groups and campaigns, and local groups of all kinds, some of which are short-lived.

Perhaps a key problem has been that the Trades Council has not represented all the main unions in the area. The Post Office workers (who tried to send an NF delegate) and the bus and rail workers are not represented. Another factor is that the Trades Council, the local Federation of Tenants' Associations and the NALGO branch have all been dominated by the Communist Party. For this or other reasons the Trades Council and tenants' federation have seemed unable to play an organising role, other than putting on occasional public meetings starring MPs etc.

Squatters

But when the Gutter Press was started in 1972 we knew little of all this. The people who started it came from what might be called the squatting milieu. The existence of numerous empty council-owned houses, in the midst of a housing shortage, had led to the 'squatting movement.' This was a rather complex anti-authoritarian and cultural movement which followed on from the 'underground/hippy' and student movements of

the sixties. It included few members of organised left groups but many who wanted to change society. Issue 3 of the Gutter Press (1972) listed squatters' plans for playgroups, free schools, toy workshops, community centres, street theatre, craft workshops, encounter centres . . .

This abundant vision went with a quite dismissive attitude to the local Labour Party and left organisations. Even local street festivals were attacked in early issues of the Gutter Press as attempts by the local state to create the illusion of harmony. All social workers and community workers were described as 'soft cops.'

Early days

The editorial of the first Gutter Press sketched the problems of the Islington area and the ways groups of people were organising to do something about them. It went on:

'This paper aims to be a forum where all those groups in the borough who want to control change, instead of being controlled by the forces which badly affect us, can get to know each other.'

It carried articles on the Housing Finance Bill, rent strikes, a home-workers action group, social security, housing speculation, 'why not squat', play projects, a school strike, etc.

The second issue announced: 'The Gutter Press . . . is a paper to which anyone can contribute and in which everyone who comes to the meetings has an equal say in the content. It is the collective opinion of people who come to meetings that actually formulates the paper. The more people who get involved through writing articles and letters, graphics, typing, distribution, and simply talking, the more the Gutter Press will be a true community paper, the more it will echo the real feelings of our community, and the better it will cover what is really happening.'

Open meetings were held weekly. The editorial went on to state 'we are learning how to put out a paper by actually doing it.'

This kind of philosophy was also reflected in the organisation of the printshop at that time. The printshop was in the basement of a squatted shop. The ground floor was a meeting room, and two people lived on the upstairs floors. No printing was done for people: it was an 'open workshop' where people were shown how to use the equipment so they could do it for themselves.

One of those involved looks back on this as the 'romantic period' of the press. Living on the premises, the distinction between work and social life was unclear. Information on squatting, etc. was also given, and the telephone rang at all hours of the day and night. People would come from distant places, print all day and night and expect a bed afterwards.

In political terms, the group around the press related to the national 'Liber-



Photos: Community Press

tarian Newsletter' which flourished for a couple of years in the early seventies. There were national 'Libertarian Network' conferences, and locally we were involved in organising 'All-Islington Libertarian meetings.'

A brief look at some of these meetings will help to recall our political 'area' at that time.

The first was held in January 1973 and the minutes are titled 'All Islington Assembly of Revolutionary Libertarians'. About 80 people were present and there were reports from two claimants' unions, a 'women and work' group, a women's centre, two playhouses, a hospital workers' group, a bookshop/library, a theatre group, a housing research group, an employment group, PROP and some people starting a 'free swap-shop' in a squat. The building housing the press and Gutter Press was mentioned both as community press and advice centre.

Looking back, even this list doesn't do justice to the richness of the social life and political ideas of the anti-establishment milieu at the time.

Bugbears

By August that year, the attendance had dwindled to 15 and it was noted that the press building 'didn't work as a general information centre any more' and legal, claiming and housing enquiries were being referred to people and groups specialising in these. The idea of a mass squat was discussed and this brought up the libertarian bogey (at that time) of 'interventionism':

'Various people were suggested as possibly wanting to be involved in the squat - those in desperate housing situations who left their kids at the Social Services Dept. or went to the Housing Action Aid Centre... When people were talking in this way they were met with accusations of elitism and manipulation. Thus a general discussion began around the concept of intervention etc. Not everyone present had worked through earlier discussions on interventionism during which the need to always organise around our own oppression had been examined. Consequently the discussion wasn't particularly productive and stopped us being able to get anything more concrete worked out about the idea of doing a mass squat...'

Some of the bugbears of the local libertarianism of the time can be seen in these minutes. The aversion to 'interventionism' and the emphasis on 'organising around your own oppression' (probably expressions that libertarians coined) were a reaction to the manipulative, stab-in-the-back tactics of left groups 'parachuting' into a situation. The emphasis on local activity was a reaction to small, national self-styled vanguards imposing their wrong ideas on local struggles.

These aversions to what we saw as the mistakes of the organised left prevented many of us from joining an organisation

— Big Flame — which many of us were attracted to and indeed were half-way to joining. But paradoxically, they later led to a gradual coming closer to people in the local Labour Party left. The Labour Party's organisation allows large numbers of people to be members who are completely opposed to the parliamentary party's policies — this is part of its complex, undemocratic structure and historic compromise with the bourgeoisie.

Local politics

Recent years have seen a number of developments in the area, in which the Gutter Press has played a part. Squatting became important from about 1972 — a squatters' group met regularly, fought evictions and ideological battles, and lobbied the council.

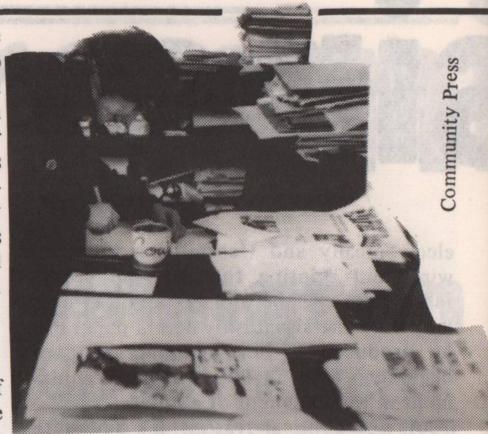
Women have been especially active. A women's centre was started in 1973, a Working Women's Charter group and a nursery action group in 1974, a NAC group and a battered wives home (now Women's Aid) in 1975, a rape crisis centre in 1976. Socialist feminist groups also met and the women's centre was a focus for a number of groups with different interests.

On the industrial front, 1974-75 saw five occupations against closures. All were lost. The only other main area of militancy in the private sector has been building workers. Some public sector workers have been continuously militant — council workers, hospital and dole office workers.

The area has had local black projects, like the Harambee and Keskidee centres and the Black Parents' Movement, and campaigns around police harassment, like the 'Wood Green 18' and the 'Islington 18'. An anti-racist group was formed in 1976 and a new one in 1978.

In the field of housing there has been continuous activity. The campaign against 'winkling' and other aspects of landlordism focused on estate agent Prebbles throughout 1974. Since then activity has concentrated on the council, especially on the problem of repairs.

A local campaign against cuts in public spending started in 1974, right after the first Labour government circular telling local councils to make cuts. This cuts campaign fizzled out in 1976, partly due to a boycott by the Comm-



unist Party-dominated Trades Council, Tenants Federation and NALGO. A new anti-cuts campaign is currently (late '79) being started. Let's hope it learns from past mistakes.

This may give some idea of the exciting — but confusing — situation in which we have worked. In many of these projects and campaigns, members of the Gutter Press collective have been active. The paper has functioned as a means of publicising them to a wider audience, as a means of bringing together different strands, and at times as a study and educational group.

In some ways the trajectory of the Gutter Press from 1972 to 1979 might be seen as a process of learning about the local area and the forces acting within it and on it, coupled with a progressive accommodation with other elements of the local left, and a strategy of trying to bring them together.

It wasn't until 1974 that we were able to politically analyse the three main groupings in the local Labour Party (and council, since it was 100 percent Labour). And when the campaign against cuts started in that year, we were forced to research and publicise the workings of local government finance.

The Labour Party

At about that time some of the Labour Party began to approach us. Keith Veness, a left-winger in the notoriously corrupt and right-wing dominated North Islington Labour Party, wrote to try and enlist our support in 'cleansing the Augean stables of the Labour movement'. Later he gave us an interview which led to his expulsion, and contributed to the long drawn out and nationally publicised scandal which led to that constituency party being disbanded by Transport House and Keith's reinstatement four years later. In between, we started getting much better links with the Labour left, who were keen to publicise the internal politics of local Labour. The other side of this is that they are constantly pushing the line that everyone on the left should join the Labour Party, and this is one that needs arguing against carefully at the moment.

The Socialist Centre

The Islington Socialist Centre was

formed at a 'Gutter Press Conference' in mid-1978. (Previously we'd organised a 'People's Field Day' — our own festival — in 1976, and a 'May Fair' in 1977.) 150 people came to the Conference from many sections of the local left, dominated by the 'non-aligned'.

The Socialist Centre is, at the moment (though looking for premises) really a socialist club meeting weekly above a pub for films, discussions, theatre, music etc. It involves several left groups and non-aligned socialists and was inspired partly by the Brixton Socialist Club and Tyneside Socialist Centre. A main idea behind it was to create a focus for socialism locally, outside the sectarian squabbles of the left groups. I think it has started to do this, though it suffers problems of 'ghettoization' and lack of mass appeal.

Changes

Both the press and the paper have changed over the years in the direction of more structured organisation and less informality. The paper no longer has weekly open meetings, but is run by a closed group which decides when and whether to look for new members. It has been a slow evolution. After about 18 months, all of the founding group had left the paper. The new group of people were less experienced, and had more problems simply getting the paper out.

Also, more responsibility began to be taken for the specific political position of the Gutter Press. At the beginning it had claimed to be completely open while in fact pushing a consistent, libertarian-socialist, direct-action, self-organisation line. People coming to meetings ranged from right-wing Labour to Angry Brigade supporters, and some of the discussions are recalled as 'quite hair-raising.'

Open meetings were cut to one per issue. Now, they have been dropped altogether. But now there is the Socialist Centre, which the Gutter Press played a major role in starting.

For a long time, I think the main idea was that we were producing a paper with the views of libertarians in the area, and also publicising people in struggle, aimed at 'working class people' in general. Progressively we've come to accept that our sustaining readership is, in fact, the local left.

Voluntary

Some similar dynamics can be seen in the history of the press. For the first three years there were no paid workers — it was run by the voluntary labour of people on the dole or who had spare time. No rent and rates had to be paid since it was in a squat. Quite a lot of work was produced, and many groups were introduced to printing and enabled to bring out publications. And the equipment stood up pretty well. But there were problems with the printing machine in particular getting dirty and out of condition.

This sort of problem, together with the need to move to a new building when

the old one was due for demolition, led to the decision to have a paid worker and take on paid work to pay wages — and rent and rates. From this point on, there's been a pressure inherent in the situation, towards restricting the do-it-yourself side, so the paid work can get done. We still show people how to do it themselves, though we now spend more time doing 'service' printing. There are now five full-time workers and one part-time.

Pressure

For a long time there was an ideology of 'write-it-yourself' on the Gutter Press. We thought that, rather than 'reporting', we should get people to write themselves about what they were involved in. But people are busy and find writing difficult, and it was usually more work for us to write an article out of someone than to write it ourselves — and the results were sometimes not very readable. But we didn't want to be 'alternative journalists' or experts, we wanted to encourage people to develop their own abilities. One solution has been interviews, transcribed, as a way of reporting.

Similarly, the idea of letting novices loose in a printshop, even if they're happy with 'bad printing', as long as they've done it, can conflict with the need to run an efficient workshop to do good quality service printing. The ideal would be to have two separate, but interconnected workshops.

Lessons

The radical local press often seems to



Local Organising
Islington Socialist Centre
Membership Card

be ephemeral by nature. Why has the Islington Gutter Press survived for seven years and 59 issues (so far)?

One reason is the organic link to the press. Another is that the group has been content with small successes, and recognised the limitations of what the paper can do — to service the left locally and to produce a genuine alternative newspaper. There is a sustaining left readership in the area, though the Gutter Press may have helped to create that. Another reason is that the Gutter Press group has tried to keep a clear idea of what it's doing, discussing whether we're trying to produce an 'organ', 'just a paper', or an organising tool, for example.

Has it all been worthwhile? I think so. The traditional style of left political activism repels many people. A movement for socialism needs a culture and an infrastructure as well as a set of ideas and an endless series of meetings. Though there is a long way to go, I think we have made a contribution, perhaps one which others can learn from.

Tyneside

Hilary Wainwright

One cold night in the middle of December 1975, near enough 250 trade unionists, feminists, members of different revolutionary groups, of the Labour Party and of the Communist Party stood or sat as close together as they'd ever been, to hear Harry McShane and the Belt and Braces Rock Band open a converted shop front and back yard as the premises of a Socialist Centre on Tyneside. They'd come together after months of anger and demoralisation at the way in which Wilson had ditched the relatively radical promises of the '74 manifesto, and at the failure of the Labour left – in the party and the unions – to lead a fight. Hopes were running high that we could create at least the local foundations of a socialist alternative.

Socialism from below

Many of the 250 who came that night felt that beyond all the important political differences that have produced different organisations, there could be, and needed to be, a wider unity of all those who believed in the socialism of workers' 'self movement, and self activity' – as Harry McShane put it that evening – 'socialism from below,' socialism, that is, based on workers' power rather than parliamentary impotence. The hopeless fate of all those radical Labour Party conference resolutions, and of all the campaigns to elect left leaders had brought that home. The daily announcements of further cuts, further redundancies and the few signs of mass resistance were creating the impression that time was running out for socialists in the North East. The old centres of militancy were being eroded by the pull of redundancy money and a fatalistic acceptance of the decline of the traditional industries. And there was a lot still to be done to establish a socialist tradition in the new areas of employment in the public services.

A wide alliance

Against this background socialists from different organisations and experiences felt that through a socialist centre we could, in the long run, create a wide alliance of people who agreed about the struggles which needed to be fought and won, who recognised that socialism was not yet a clear cut programme but a set of principles and commitments which needed to be openly clarified in response to practical problems, and finally who felt that socialism would only really gain local roots if it was enriched with a cultural, educational and social life that

needed conscious nurture and organisation.

So it was a motley crew which first came together to establish a socialist centre on the Tyne: shop stewards disillusioned by the defeat of Benn and the policies he stood for, trade unionists in the public sector who, with socialist community workers, were equally demoralised by the government's ruthless run down of the welfare state. The majority of these two groups were members of the Labour Party, with varying degrees of commitment. Earlier in the year they had created their own campaigning bodies: the industrial workers had formed the Tyne Shop Stewards Conference, public sector workers had organised the Tyneside Action Committee Against the Cuts. But as single 'sector' campaigns, gaining little real response from the Labour Party, beyond a few sympathetic but powerless gestures, these organisations were facing increasing difficulties.

The other impetus for the alliance came from socialists outside the Labour Party. From revolutionaries who, from inside experience or from outside appearances, felt the existing groups were too sectarian in their tactics, too dogmatic in their discussion and/or too bureaucratic in their internal regimes, to adapt to the new problems posed by the successes of the Social Contract and industrial rationalisation. A wider group which provided an important initial impetus were socialist feminists who, while continuing their support for an autonomous women's movement felt they also had a responsibility to help create a socialist movement in which feminism would play a central part. Another group, often strongly influenced by socialist feminism were a small number of libertarian marxists who were increasingly recognising the importance of closer links with organised Labour and seeing that this needn't entail a subservience to the bureaucracies of the unions.

To these groups outside the Labour Party the idea of alliance around a variety of projects, seemed to provide a way of contributing to a wider socialist movement without losing the autonomy from which to develop their own ideas.

Political forum

These were the hopes then, what was the reality? Before going into detail perhaps I could sum it up by saying that we have achieved a lot in terms of 'one off successes' (balanced by a few one off disasters!) but our organisational founda-

tions have been weak. So we have rarely been able to grow from these successes (in terms of the strength and real material impact of socialist ideas, that is, not simply membership, which has been growing fairly steadily though not always meaning very much in terms of active commitment to the centre).

I'll describe this contradiction in more detail and spell out some of the problems we are now working on and with what successes. In the first two and a half years we were based in a building which had a large meeting hall (though grotty and cold), a number of discussion group type rooms plus a bookshop and office. For a time it just about served its purpose, but it was too far out of town, too expensive and, for all the voluntary work put into it, it was impossible to make it really habitable. Partly as a result of these problems we moved last year to central premises which consist only of a bookshop and office, with the aim of establishing a meeting place once the bookshop was established. The initial choice of building, then, was a mistake; we had rushed into renting it for fear that delay would have brought on the common disease of the left: talking an initiative out of existence. This can be so prevalent especially with something which marks a real innovation, that there is probably a case for saying that the emphasis should be, with basic precautions, on taking the decisions and clearing up the mistakes afterwards. In our case this probably worked, in the sense that the time we had in the old building proved the case for a socialist alliance with a *real* socialist meeting place and built up a wide commitment to the project (in financial terms for example the centre receives £200 a month in bankers orders plus numerous donations, smaller subscriptions, affiliation fees etc., many of which are given on the assumption that we are aiming to establish a physical centre in addition to our other activities. Our membership is around 170 plus affiliated organisations including the SWP, a branch of the CP, the IMG, the Newcastle Trades Council, and a number of shop stewards' committees).

Passive support

While we were in the building we had regular and normally very well attended forums on such issues as socialists and the Labour Party, socialist activity during elections, the opposition in Eastern Europe, workers plans and combine committees, the crisis in the welfare state, sexual politics, the deportation of Agee and Hosenball etc., attendance ranged from 40-300 (held in another building!) At the same time we organised a variety of workshops and courses for which we got support from the WEA, on socialist history and strategy in Britain, the welfare state, feminism and socialism and an introduction to marxism. Taken together over 50 people attended these courses on a regular basis. In addition we had regular socials, both discos in the building and more ambitious events with theatre groups and bands in other pre-

mises; we organised support, with the trades council, for a number of strikes, leafletting against the N.F. (this was in pre-ANL days), we made the rather stumbling beginnings of a regular bulletin of socialist debate and information for the left, and we established the foundations for a socialist bookshop on Tyneside.

All this was well supported, but in a rather passive, receiving sense; people enjoyed themselves, were stimulated by new ideas and debates, in their own ways they spread whatever ideas and enthusiasm their involvement in the centre had generated. But our organisation was very weak. Only a few people were really involved in organising the centre, in the sense of giving it an overall direction and feeling responsible for all the 'boring' but essential problems of finance, following up new supporters and thinking through how the new structures of the alliance should develop. And even those few who did feel responsible for practical problems were not always very well equipped to carry them out. In this respect there was a marked difference between those with some experience, in say shop stewards committees, of the long and sometimes tedious job of building an organisation that will grow in strength rather than flash across the scene and into oblivion, with all the attention to finance, membership and efficiency which that entails; and on the other hand those whose experience – mostly from 1968 onwards – had been of mass movements which grew rapidly but rarely consolidated their advances.

Foundation crumbles

We compounded our organisational problems by trying to become more outward going and activist, before really securing our foundations. Just to illustrate: in 1977 we had what seemed at the time a very euphoric AGM at which 80 or so supporters spent a whole day discussing and eventually agreeing the principles and demands on which we could unite, deciding to hold monthly general meetings for discussion of the main struggles and campaigns on Tyneside and working out in detail specific Socialist Centre projects. Before all these decisions and enthusiasm could really be put into practice – though we were able to have a significant impact on the firemen's strike on Tyneside later that year – our material foundations began to crack. The bookshop was running into crisis and it was clear that the old building was too heavy a financial and organisational burden to carry.

Since then a lot of our energy and time has gone into establishing a new central bookshop, not simply as a shop which is more welcoming and efficient than the old one but also as an active disseminator of socialist literature. We've now got to a point where very few public meetings, trade union schools etc. do not have a Socialist Centre bookstall from our bookshop, 'Days of Hope.' The organisation of the bookshop involves at least 25 people on a fairly regular basis –

including one full time worker and two part time workers.

In a number of ways this campaigning way of organising the bookshop prepares the way for the future development of the centre. It established the idea of the socialist centre in the minds of many trade unionists and others who would probably not normally have come across our public meetings, bulletin and other activities. As and when the Centre is able to widen its concerns, we will, all being well, have an important credibility and base on which to build.

Furthermore, the dilemmas, problems and even struggles which have taken place over the bookshop have created a wider core of comrades who understand the practical problems of creating an organisation and being responsible for its material resources. If one is ever to organise a meeting place and socialist club in addition to campaigning and educational activity, as most people hope we will, then the development of this understanding and practical commitment will have been essential.

Role of bulletin

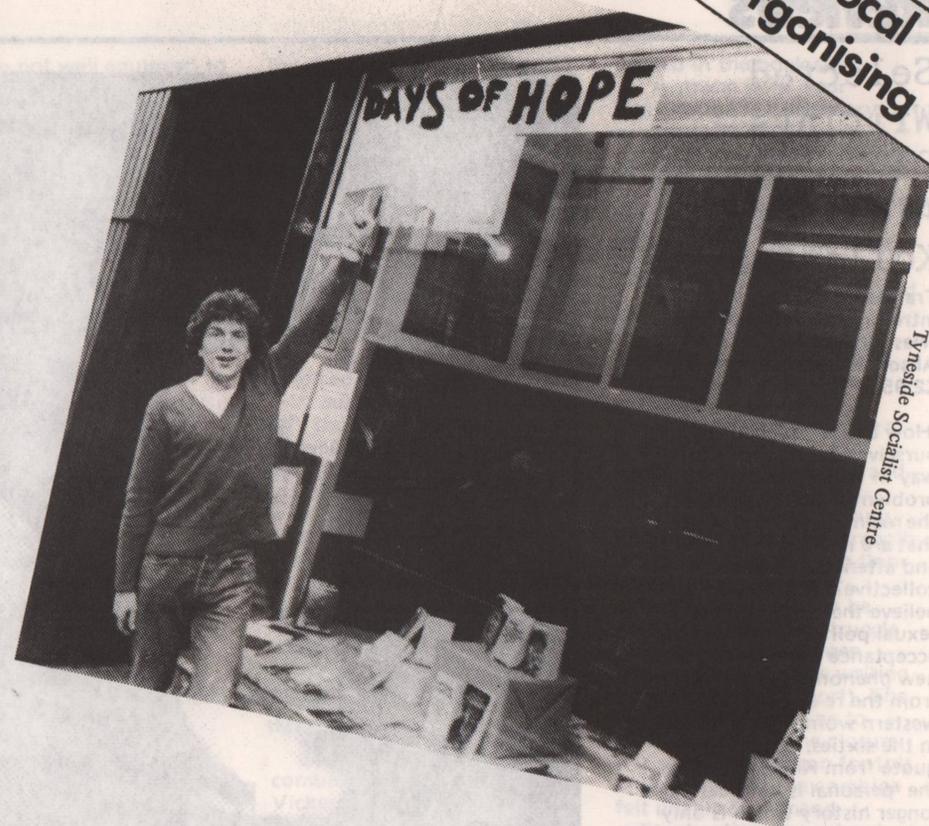
Another aspect of the Centre which has improved considerably and has also played an important role in preparing for the future is the bulletin. The monthly Socialist Centre bulletin is not a popular socialist newspaper like the Islington Gutter Press. Tyneside already has a paper – the Workers Chronicle, run by the Trades Council – which could with a bit more support and audacity serve this function. The bulletin is more of a review, a forum for political debate and reflection on the struggles and problems of socialists on Tyneside and very impor-

tantly a way of revealing the corruption, and manoeuvrings built into the entrenched Labour establishment of the North East.

No friction

In this, as with other of our activities, some members see our purpose as being to prepare the way for a strong challenge to the Labour Party; others are still more or less committed to changing the Labour Party. So far this has rarely been a source of major friction, because we've concentrated on building the alliance around immediate issues rather than long term strategy. We discuss long term strategy, but not at this stage in order to come to collective decisions. But if the Centre members begin to use the Centre as more than an alliance for propaganda and propaganda and debate and sporadic campaigns, this issue will in time come to the fore.

When the bookshop is fully established, the campaign for a meeting place will be underway and we are ready to have a more direct and consistent influence on the course of workers' and community struggles in the area, we won't be starting from scratch. Many socialists have already gone a long way towards creating a core of socialists in different tenants groups, women's groups, shop stewards committees and so on. The Centre's role will be to provide a way of uniting this fragmented practice and thereby pull together the forces for a coherent alternative to the Labour establishment of the North East. Such a possibility will of course depend partly on developments on a national level; but at least we'll be placed to grasp the opportunities which national developments present.



Tyneside Socialist Centre

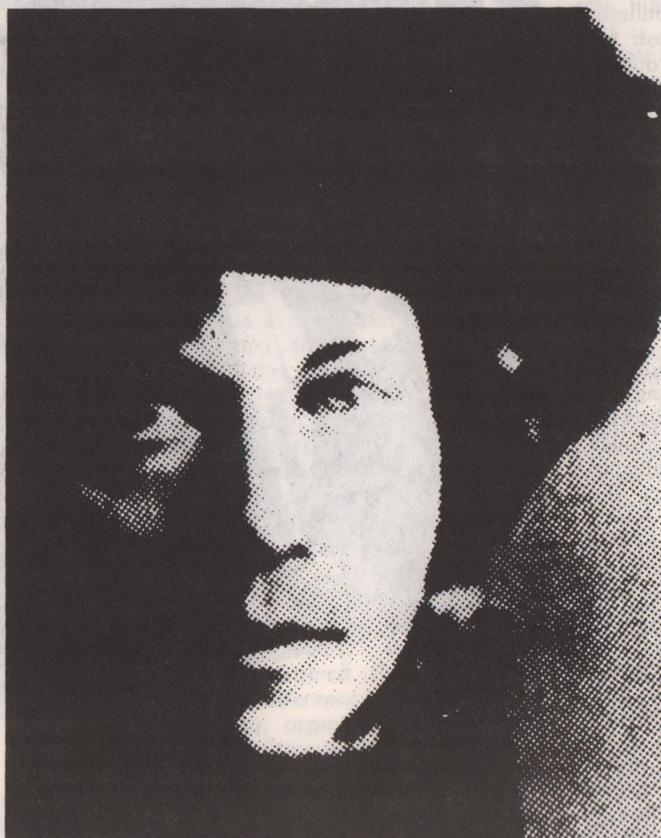
Local
Organising

Selected Writings Of Alexandra Kollantai

Translated with an introduction and commentaries by Alix Holt
Alison & Busby, London
£2.95

'How can we explain to ourselves the hypocritical way in which "sexual problems" are relegated to the realm of "private matters" that are not worth the effort and attention of the collective?' It is easy to believe that struggle around sexual politics and for their acceptance by the left is a new phenomenon, dating from the re-emergence of the western women's movement in the sixties. But, as this quote from Kollantai shows, the 'personal is political' has a longer history which is only now in the process of being reclaimed and discovered.

'The personal is political' is a slogan open to one-sided interpretations. On the one hand it can advocate alternative life-styleism — change only at the level of attitudes and ideas in people's heads. On the other, it can be used to argue that only changes in material conditions can bring change to our personal relationships: the 'political' struggle must be prioritised and personal politics can wait. Kollantai is striving towards a much more dialectical understanding of 'the personal is political'. Our personal relationships serve class interests. Not only in their institutionalised form — marriage, the family etc. — but through the actual feelings and emotions we experience. 'Love', writes Kollantai, 'is a profoundly social emotion'; 'it is an important psychological and social factor, which society has always instinctively organised in its interests. Thus revolutionaries cannot afford to view emotions or relationships as somehow ahistorical or value free. We must actively create a morality that serves our own interests. 'Our task', writes Kollantai, 'is to draw out from the chaos of present-day contradictory sexual norms the shape, and make clear the principles, of a morality that answers the spirit of the progressive and revolutionary class.'



Kollantai recognises the oppression of women, and the particular social relations of sexuality that structure that oppression within bourgeois society. For Kollantai socialist revolution is an essential prerequisite for women's liberation. Calls for 'free love' or women's independence within capitalism are based on a bourgeois notion of freedom and can only lead to formal, not real liberation. In the same way as freedom of contract for labour and capital became a means of exploitation of labour by capital, so would 'free love' become merely a fresh burden for the woman, who would be left to support her children unaided. For Kollantai, sexual equality is only possible in a society where housework and child-care have been socialized. But, on the other hand, a socialist revolution only creates the material pre-conditions for women's liberation. Kollantai insists on the need for struggle **both before and after** the revolution at the level of ideology — of attitudes and ideas: 'If the sexual crisis is three-quarters the result of external socio-economic relationships, the other quarter hinges on our "refined individualistic psyche" fostered by the ruling bourgeois ideology.'

There are three basic circumstances which Kollantai identifies as distorting the modern psyche — extreme egoism, the idea that married partners possess each other, and the acceptance of the inequality of the sexes in terms of physical and emotional experience. Extreme egoism Kollantai sees as resulting from the 'crude individualism' of bourgeois society and it necessarily creates proprietorial relationships. The individualist pines and moans for a 'great love' which can alleviate the alienation s/he experiences — 'for a situation of warmth and creativity which alone has the power to disperse the cold spirit of loneliness from which present day individualists suffer.' But the irony of the romantic myth is that whilst being 'in love' grants the right to the soul of the other person ('the right to warm [oneself] in the rays of that rare blessing and understanding'), our emotions are so distorted by egoism that we give nothing of ourselves. Yet at the same time the proprietorial basis of relationships rests not only on physical fidelity but also on emotional fidelity and exclusiveness: 'We have all no doubt observed this strange situation — two people who love each other are in a hurry, before they have got to know

each other properly, to exercise their rights over all the relationships that the other person has formed up till that time, to look into the innermost corners of their partner's life.'

It is the inequality of the sexes and the 'double standard' which, for Kollantai, makes sexual relationships so especially oppressive for women. The 'double standard' attitudes of patrimonial and bourgeois society are 'so much a part of us that they are more difficult to get rid of than the ideas about possessing people that we have inherited only from bourgeois society.' Bourgeois society cannot see a woman as an independent person separate from her family unit and outside the isolated circle of domestic obligations and virtues. Her personality is judged almost exclusively in terms of her sexual life — with grave consequences if she oversteps the mark — 'we are used to evaluating women not as a personality with individual qualities and failings irrespective of her physical and emotional experience, but only as an appendage of a man.' And she pays the price for any 'independent choice' she might make.

Kollantai's insights are particularly relevant to current debates on monogamy, collective living, multiple relationships etc. She states unequivocally 'the isolation of the "couple" as a special unit does not answer the interests of communism.' However she at the same time reveals the material interest bourgeois society has in perpetuating atomized, privatized relationships. Our choices are structured. But struggle against them is subversive and political. For Kollantai the solution is collectivity. Collective ownership and control of society and a struggle towards the greatest possible complexity and breadth of emotion within that society. She understands the unequal position from which women enter that struggle. My criticism would be that she underestimates that inequality by not recognizing the full material force of patriarchy and what men have to lose. The failure of the sexual revolution in the Soviet Union only further illustrates how necessary an autonomous women's movement is.

Julia South

Workers' Report On Vickers

by Huw Beynon and Hilary Wainwright
Pluto Press £2.40

If past performance is anything to go by, the Labour movement and its 'vanguards' remain hemmed in by ancient dogma and out-of-date understanding of capitalist reality. This is an important book in that its authors look at both the changing strategy of a transnational corporation (Vickers) and the new structures that the working class develops in an attempt to cope with management's new strategy. As the book makes clear, management has the advantage, since it literally has the world as its terrain for operation whereas union structures remain locally

based — not well equipped to deal with the product diversification and internationalisation of the company. As the book points out, this backwardness has its roots in the way the trade unions developed: 'Trade union organisation developed in response to a particular problem and to a particular kind of capitalism. A craft union like the Amalgamated Society of Engineers developed to defend the interests of skilled men. Its geographically-based (as opposed to factory-based) branches and quasi-autonomous districts, reflected the movement of tradesmen between particular factories and also the local ownership of those factories.' And in the development of working class militancy, it is regional consciousness and trade consciousness that are dominant: Geordies see themselves as being the most militant and look down on Southerners, the same goes

for Scouse etc. And over time, local militancy has affected wage-rates and custom and practice to such a degree as to pose enormous problems for the building of a company-wide Combine Committee, which the book puts forward as a partial answer to the transnational corporation. Not surprisingly, it was the Vickers plant at which wages were highest that felt no need to get involved in the combine: 'I suppose the committee felt that we had a choice between concerning ourselves with the interests of our own members or getting involved with "brotherhood". We're only brothers to a certain extent you see. If we're all going to share and share alike, the lions will start roaring if they have to share with the pussycats.' (Page 116)

IMPORTANT VICTORY

So the creation of the combine committee in Vickers must be seen as an important victory against the parochialism that is a feature of much workplace organisation. Though this is not the end of the story since factory based wage-bargaining with its use of parity demands, leap-frogging etc. is a vital weapon of the workers against the (national) company-wide wage-bargaining the employers would dearly love to enforce. Like all employers, Alf 'Lord' Robens would dearly love to get in this country German/U.S. style national contracts and industrial unionism:

'The trade union movement in this country was formed in the days of crafts and guilds! It is totally unsuitable to modern conditions. It's like using a penny farthing bicycle in the jet age. We are reducing the number of unions but what is needed is industrial unionism. I am a firm believer in industrial unionism; you only have to look to America to see this.' (page 172)

MANAGEMENT'S ATTITUDE

So far Vickers' management has taken a tough line with the combine — refusing to recognise it for the purposes of negotiation. But as the book points out, it is quite possible for them to radically change their tactics and by recognising the combine hope to isolate its members from the work-places they represent. As one of the militants

quoted in the book says:

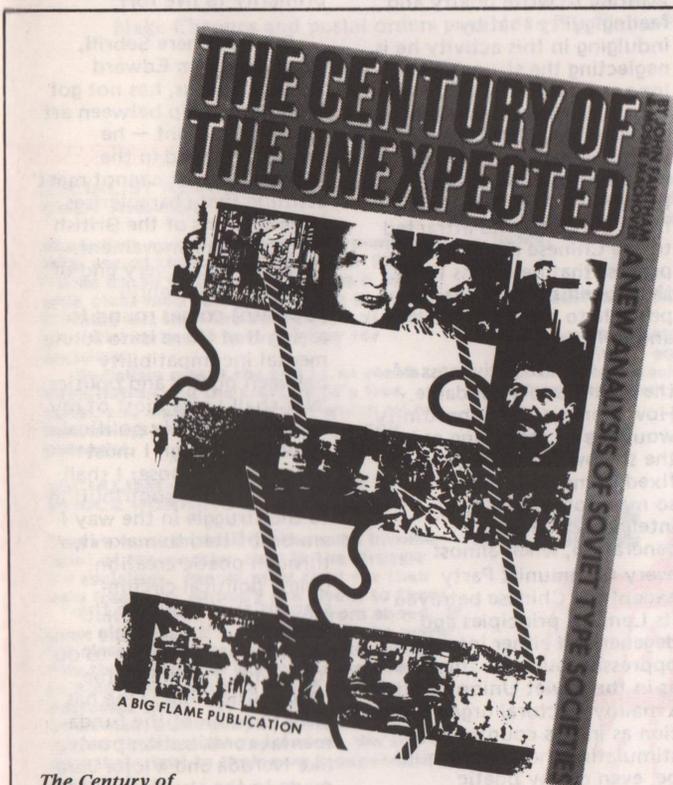
'A strong shop floor organisation is a necessary pre-requisite for a strong combine committee, which is itself an essential element of factory organisation if we are going to be able to counter management. The two must go ahead together.'

The point is important and should work against any temptation to see combine committees as a possible 'miracle cure' against weak shop-floor organisation. Combine committees have a useful role to play in the exchange of information and the formation of a joint strategy in a large company like Vickers but their strength is that of the local shop-floor organisations they are composed of. This can be seen in the defeated struggle to keep Scotswood open (which post-dates the writing of the Workers' Report). The failure of the combine to intervene against the closure was stark. One reason for this failure was that the combine felt unable to demand militant action throughout Vickers' plants in a situation where the Scotswood stewards themselves were not confident enough to call for militant action in their own plant. Another reason was the lack of unity between the different Newcastle plants which was a clash of personalities but also a reflection of the material fact that the closure of Scotswood makes the future of the other Newcastle plants that much more secure.

THE PROBLEM REMAINS

With the hindsight of the Scotswood disaster, it is easy to see that the authors' assessment of the combine is too uncritical. But they can hardly be blamed for clutching at whatever straws there are going. Since 1945, the balance of forces between workers and transnational corporations has continued to shift in the corporations' favour. The trade union bureaucracy has shown itself unable (and in many cases unwilling) to redress the balance in the workers' favour. Combine committees can be a structure in which stewards elaborate a rank and file response to a transnational's strategy. As each week brings another transnational that 'takes the grants and runs', such a response is urgently needed.

Peter Anderson



The Century of the Unexpected is a pamphlet published by Big Flame which puts forward important new insights on the nature of so-called socialist societies (i.e. the U.S.S.R., Eastern Europe).

In the pamphlet, its authors, Fantham and Machover, argue that the so-called socialist societies should be seen as 'state collectivist' — and that the way they have developed comes from their beginning as societies where capitalism was overthrown at a time of the very low development of productive forces.

In the pamphlet, the authors decisively confront accepted views on the so-called socialist societies (i.e. 'state capitalist' and 'degenerate workers' state' theories). They also provide us with a way of understanding how a country (e.g. the U.S.S.R.) can move from a progressive to a reactionary phase whilst retaining the same mode of production.

The Century of the Unexpected costs 65p. It is distributed by PDC and is available from all progressive bookshops.

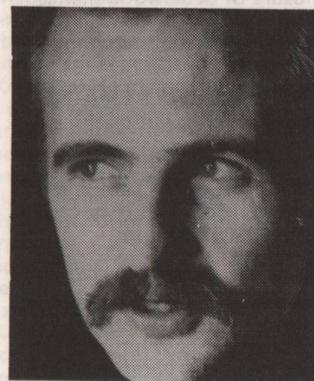
Reviews

Two Revolutionary Novels

Undesirable Alien by Regis Debray, Allen Lane £4.25
The Spiral Ascent by Edward Upward. Quartet. three volumes £2.50 each

Novels can be revolutionary in form or content or both. Neither Debray or Upward are interested in undermining the traditional form of the novel; on the contrary, you could almost say that the power of both these books in fact relies on the effect produced by a collision between all the trimmings that make up the novel as an art-form with the subject of these books which is the possibility of revolutionary politics today.

Undesirable Alien is an autobiographical book in that the narrator is a European militant who goes to Latin America to fight in a war of national liberation — he becomes a member of a group whose politics are a mixture of those of the Tupamaros of Uruguay and the Montoneros of Argentina. In the book, the events of the liberation struggle serve as a backdrop to an ongoing series of reflexions on the revolutionary process, violence, commitment etc. One of the



Regis Debray

central themes of the book is the contradiction that a revolutionary party needs uncritical support at certain times though, in the long run, this uncritical support produces a generation of mindless militants who are unable to correct the party when it goes wrong:

'To be a revolutionary today does not mean to make the revolution an absolute. But nor can you be a revolu-

tionary without having, some day or other, to face the lions in the arena, or kill a few gladiators. Agnostics have never made outstanding martyrs. Or good gladiators. Any communist today who has no doubts at all about communism is a dangerous lunatic. Yet no one with doubts will ever succeed in storing a nest of machine-guns. Anyone who gives his total, unquestioning, unmeasured loyalty needs putting in a straitjacket. Yet if he questions and measures, his loyalty will be about as dependable as a sponge.

One is simply not prepared to die, or to kill, for ideas that do not merit capitalisation. Every sacrifice needs to have an absolute value. Yet the age of absolutes no longer exists, whereas that of sacrifices and holocausts is back in full force . . .

'Can it be that the virtue of a revolutionary is in proportion to the number and seriousness of the questions he refuses to ask himself? Starting with that most taboo of all questions — the precise meaning of the word 'revolution', to which he has devoted his life, and to which he will owe his death. It is a marvellous word, a word of suffering and splendour, whose full basso richness, velvet depth and fiery tongue only really emerge when it is spoken in Spanish. But what does it mean? What will it do? At what cost? With what ultimate object?'

The narrator's way out of this dilemma is to convince himself that the tempo of revolution is different in Latin America (a colony) than in Europe, an imperialist heartland and that with this different tempo goes a different level of commitment. Throughout the novel, Debray appeals to the idea that the solution to differences of revolutionary strategy and theory lies in cultural differences between the 'old' and the 'new' world — Europe and Latin America. In all cases, he is overwhelmed by the superiority of the new world, even in the relationship between man and woman — the woman revolutionary is portrayed as accepting the virilism (machismo) of her male comrade and unable to cope with his European male unheaviness.

Of course in the book, there are the seeds of Debray's (the narrator's) conversion to social-democracy — but they in no way spoil what is a very rich account of the problems facing revolutionaries today.

'The Spiral Ascent' (recently published in a paperback trilogy) is also about the possibility of being a revolutionary. Set in England in a period that goes from the 1930's to the 1960's, the book is the story of a school-teacher who gets involved in revolutionary politics, joins the CP, leaves it over the 'British Road to Socialism' (first edition) and ends up getting involved in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). The main theme of the book is the relationship between politics and art (in this case poetry). Throughout his life, Alan Sebrill (the narrator) constantly oscillates between wanting to write poetry and feeling guilty that by indulging in this activity he is neglecting the struggle. As long as he is in the CP, Sebrill cannot escape from the view that there is a fundamental antagonism between art and politics. It is only when he is expelled from the party and attracted to the Chinese revolutionary process that he begins to feel that it will be once again possible to reconcile poetry and militance:

'Oh, the attractiveness of the idea is understandable. How glorious the opportunity would be of cancelling out the sorrow which became fixed in me, as it did in so many other left-wing intellectuals of my generation, when almost every Communist Party except the Chinese betrayed its Leninist principles and degenerated either into an oppressive bureaucratic elite as in the Soviet Union or into a mainly electoral organisation as in this country. How stimulating the effect would be, even on my poetic imagination, if I could feel now as I did during my early days in the Party when I became freed from my individual woe and was one with all those in the world who were battling for the cause of humanity. I was able to begin writing poetry again then, better poetry than I had written before, and sterility returned only after the Party had begun to turn revisionist . . . But was the Party's degeneration really



Edward Upward

the reason why I once more stopped writing? Or did I stop because too much of my energy was taken up by the political struggle which was what I believed I ought primarily to live for?'

But even here Sebrill, through whom Edward Upward speaks, has not got the relationship between art and politics right — he remains trapped in the 'politics and art cannot meet' attitude that characterises large sections of the British revolutionary movement. It is only at the very end of the book that Sebrill (Upward) comes round to seeing that there is no fundamental incompatibility between poetry and politics: 'Nor shall I give most of my energy to directly political activities, though I must never neglect those: I shall make my main contribution to the struggle in the way I am best fitted to make it, through poetic creation, unless political circumstances arise in which the interests of the struggle absolutely require me to do otherwise. I shall live the new political life.' One has only to think of the fundamental contribution poets like Neruda and Victor Jara made to the struggle in Chile to realise that revolutionary politics needs poetry. Of course, Edward Upward has gambled on this being true — 'The Spiral Ascent' is the poem that he offers to the revolutionary movement. It is our choice whether we choose to accept it or not. I hope we do — it is a very fine book.

Charles Miller

Big Flame Publications

An Introduction to Big Flame 10p
Our politics, history, structure and publications.

Draft Manifesto for a New Revolutionary Organisation 1977 25p. A comprehensive manifesto written to clarify our political positions and as the basis for discussing the organisation of a mass politics tendency.

Labouring under the Tories or a Socialist Alternative? 20p
A new pamphlet which argues the need to challenge the defensive basis of existing politics in the working class movement and stress instead rank and file socialist alternatives in industry, the public sector and social life in general.

Century of the Unexpected 65p
Another new pamphlet which puts forward new insights about the nature of 'socialist' societies arguing that they should be seen as a new mode of production — state collectivism.

The Revolution Unfinished: a Critique of Trotskyism 50p
A non-sectarian critique of Trotskyism which links the strengths and weaknesses of Trotsky's original ideas to the theory and practice of current Trotskyist organisations.

All these publications can be obtained by writing to Big Flame, 217 Wavertree Road, Liverpool 7.

Make Cheques and postal orders payable to Big Flame Publications and include 10p postage for each item ordered.

SOCIALIST REVOLUTION — THE ONLY ANSWER

Capitalism means war, unemployment, poverty, sexual and racial oppression. Big Flame doesn't believe in patching it up with piece-meal reforms through parliament. Nothing less than the destruction of the capitalist state will pave the way for socialism.

Socialism means the end of all forms of exploitation and the creation of a free, equal, and classless society in which all human beings will be able to realise their potential.

SOCIALISM — A STRUGGLE OF THE WHOLE WORKING CLASS

There's no substitute for the mass involvement of the working class in the struggle for socialism. People must fight for their own freedom. Nobody can give it to them.

Unity cannot be imposed from above. It must grow out of the struggles of the working class. Socialists have a duty to recognise the differences that capitalism creates to hold back our unity — and to fight to overcome them. We support the struggle of women, black people, gays, and youth against their special oppression. We support their right to their own independent organisation.

Ultimately, Big Flame believes in the need for a new revolutionary party of the whole working class, which will play a leading role in the struggle for socialism. There is no short cut to the creation of a new party: thousands of independent socialists and militants must be won to the idea that we need it.

BIG FLAME AND WOMEN'S STRUGGLES

We are active in the women's movement and the socialist feminist tendency, where we fight for:

A Woman's Right to Choose on abortion, contraception and sexual relationships. **Freedom to walk the streets** without fear of sexual violence.

Refuges for battered women. **An end to the division of labour** between men and women, inside and outside the home.

AGAINST SEXISM AND RACISM

Big Flame supports the struggle of black people to live in equality and free from the fear of racist attacks. We support their right to form their own independent and self-

The international unity of the working class is crucial.

We are in solidarity with all socialist and republican movements fighting to free Ireland from British imperialism. We support the United Troops Out Movement and call for the immediate withdrawal of British troops and self-determination for the Irish people as a whole. A united, socialist Ireland will assist the liberation of the British working class.

IN THE WORKPLACE

Our aim is to build independent rank and file organisations opposed to the reformist leaders of the trade unions. We support the fight for higher wages, shorter hours, a lighter work load, and for full pay — work or no work. Differentials deepen the disunity and we want to see them narrowed. We oppose redundancies, incomes policies, and every device to increase exploitation.

IN THE COMMUNITY

We argue for closer links between the struggles in the community and those at work. We fight for better, community-controlled public services and for decent homes for all.

If you agree with us, why not find out more about us? We have branches or members in many cities throughout England and Wales. Send off the form if you want to find out more about Big Flame.

To Big Flame, 217 Wavertree Rd, Liverpool 7.

I would like more information about Big Flame. Please send me a copy of 'Introduction to Big Flame'. I enclose a postal order of 18p.

NAME
ADDRESS



defense organisations. We fight for the Anti-Nazi League to take an anti-racist stand against immigration controls and all forms of official harassment of black people.

TROOPS OUT OF IRELAND NOW!

Capitalism is international. The struggle for socialism and national liberation abroad aids our fight against British capitalism.