

# Discussion

## The Forward Face of Feminism

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Though Tricia Davis and Cath Hall have some criticisms of *Beyond the Fragments*, they and we agree on a central point: the need for new kinds of alliances between socialists involved in different movements and organisations. I want to use the opportunity of this discussion note to expand on this theme. In the past, most socialists have tended to favour alliances only for defensive purposes or around single or sectoral issues, where wider questions of socialist vision and strategy are not directly at stake. The need now, by contrast, is to encourage joint projects with a more positive, explicitly socialist purpose through which to develop policies and ways of organising that are better able to present a popular alternative to both Thatcherism and Labourism than can any part of the Left on its own.

We are not talking about a cobbled together ecumenicism, brought about through sense of weakness; an attempt to seek comfort in numbers. On the contrary, part of our argument rests on the potential strength of recent developments on the Left. Though these are strengths which can only be realised with more mutual contact and more concerted attempts at synthesis and debate. The weakness we have to overcome is not fundamentally one of numbers, but of policy and strategy.

The strengths which I am referring to here are all those attempts, through a combination of theory and experience — mainly since 1968, but going back to 1956 — to extend and at times to redefine, the scope of socialist demands and forms of organisation. And to do so in a way which could enable socialism to hold out genuine possibilities of liberation to people who, however oppressed and exploited under capitalism, have previously

regarded socialism with cynicism or apathy.

Cath and Tricia point to such developments within the women's movement. For example they point to the fact that 'over the last 10 years feminists haven't simply been underwriting traditional labour movement demands — for the right to work and for welfare services which enable women to enter paid employment — we have also been looking at the quality of welfare services on offer, the relationship they have to women's lives in general and not just to the lives of women as workers, and at the specific relationship of women to paid work'.

The theories and experiences of the women's movement have been one of several pressures and stimuli to new socialist analyses of and policies towards the welfare state. Among men and women working in the public sector, among activists on trades councils and within the tenants movement, a practical and theoretical attack on the traditional social democratic left as well as right view of the welfare state has been gathering strength. As the students of 1968 found themselves in jobs which made them decidedly uneasy about the uncritical view of the welfare state on which they had been reared in the 40s and 50s; and as the first cuts campaigns of the 70s came up against the ambiguous feelings people have towards the state, a whole new spate of policies and ways of organising were, and are, being developed. Tenants and resource centre workers, in for instance Coventry, Tyneside and South Wales, have been elaborating a strategy for tenants' control over council housing and developing direct action tactics to win on immediate demands and build up the confidence and cohesion of tenants organisations. Busworkers in the North East have been

campaigning round their own proposals for an integrated transport system for the area which would provide both better services for passengers and better conditions for workers. The National Childcare Campaign is bringing together trade unionists, under 5's groups, nursery workers, mothers and fathers to fight not only for more resources for childcare but for alternative policies and more democratic control over such resources. Members of unions in the health service in, for example, the Oxfordshire and Wessex regions have been trying to get a trade union plan for the health service off the ground, so that they are no longer in the weak position of having to respond, defensively, to management's plans.

Such initiatives, and many more, come up against massive obstacles in terms of lack of awareness among the membership, suspicion and vested interest among trade union officials, and the general inadequacy of labour movement structures for fighting around positive, inter-union, joint worker and consumer, alternative policies. But the shifts in this direction are clearly taking place. The large response to the pamphlet *In and Against the State*<sup>1</sup> and to the Critical Social Policy Conference on the 'Crisis in the Welfare State' are indications of the same trend.

#### Towards practical alternatives

Among industrial workers and other socialists working on industrial issues there are clear signs of a similarly widespread move away from the traditional thinking which has dominated the Left of the labour movement. In particular the move is away from reliance on Clause IV or nationalisation of the 200 monopolies as *the* solution to exploitation, alienation, unemployment and the wastage of productive resources. Instead there is a growing concern to show people what nationalisation could be *for* by fighting *now* around workers policies, or more ambitiously, plans based on social need. Moreover, there is a growing recognition of the existing factory division of labour, organisation and discipline, and the design of technology as being the product of capitalist requirements and therefore to be challenged as aggressively as private ownership. The extraordinary response, interest and enthusiasm shown by trade unionists to the plan for socially useful production first developed by the Lucas Aerospace Combine Committee; the success of the POEU Broad Left's campaign around alternative policies on new technologies; the four trades councils' inquiry into state intervention;<sup>2</sup> the growing involvement of industrial trade unionists in campaigns on nuclear power and

environmental issues, and on the other hand the increasing involvement of socialist economists and other socialist academics with industrial trade unionists are all indications of this development.

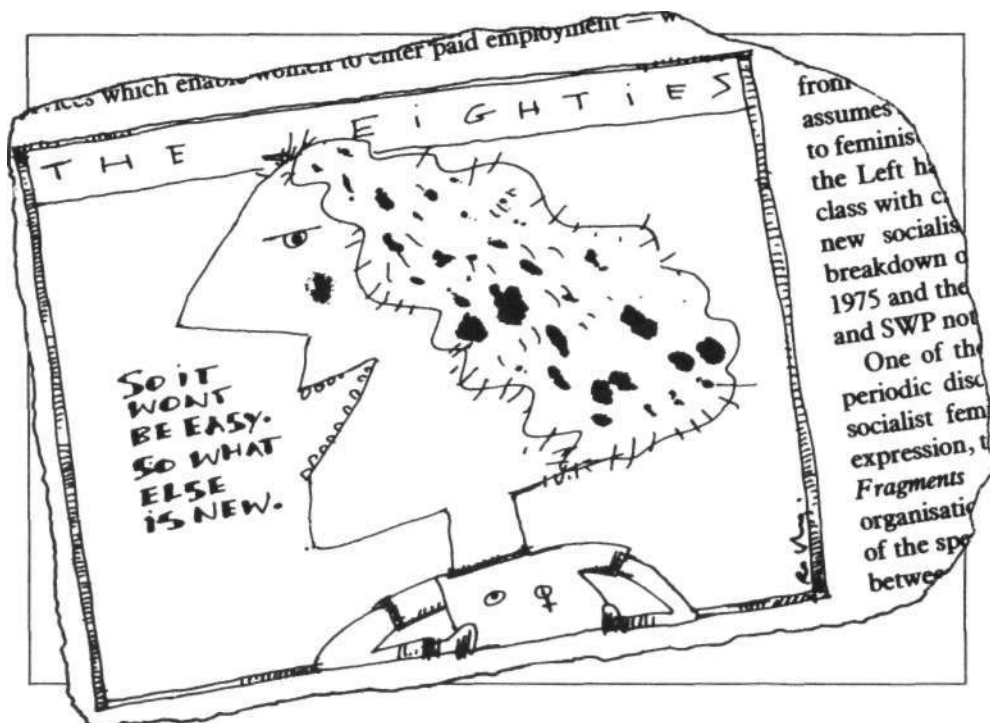
When we talk about socialist alliances we must distinguish two types of socialist organisations between which socialist alliances might be made. One type is Left parties or party type organisations, that is organisations with policies on every major issue and a full strategy for achieving socialism. The other type is socialist groupings within wider movements like the women's movement or the trade union movement, based on a general socialist commitment and specific policies for that movement.

Traditionally alliances between different Left parties have occurred only for very limited campaigns, in Britain at any rate — where admittedly, the Left has a particularly sectarian record. Traditionally also, links between socialists involved in different sectors, across these sectors, has normally occurred through the medium of a party, thus on the basis of a full and definite programme. The new developments I have briefly summarised (along with others which I have not covered because of my lack of experience or knowledge of them, such as the black and anti-racist movements and the gay movement), make it possible to break with these traditions; and the failure of the Labour Party — and everyone else on the Left for that matter — to provide a credible socialist alternative to the Tories, making it necessary and urgent to break with these inhibiting traditions.

What such a break means in effect is that, for a period, unusual — if you like 'transitional' — forms of political organisations will come, and are already coming into widespread existence. That is, organisations and groupings which are not just single issue pressure groups, but are explicitly committed to socialism, and yet which are not political parties; that is, they are not agreed about a definite programme and strategy for socialism. They are in other words alliances of socialists involved in different parties and in none, who are usually committed not only to united campaigns over immediate issues but also to developing policies and ways of organising to deal with problems that have surfaced long since the party programmes of the Left were formulated (Communist Party, Labour Left, SWP and IMG all included).

### Types of organisations

Although I don't want to rigidly classify organisations and groupings which are continually changing and developing,



illustrations of what I mean would include socialist feminist groups, conferences, and journals like *Red Rag*, *Feminist Review* and more recently *Women in Action*; groups of public sector workers such as the Politics of Health group, Health Fightback and groups in specific unions like NALGO and NUPE, and the new journal *Critical Social Policy*; the National Housing Liaison Committee which brings together activists from tenants' groups, women's groups, UCATT branches and trades councils; several combine committees<sup>3</sup> and left groupings like the POEU, broad left; research, information and campaigning centres like the Coventry and Nottingham workshops and the network of such centres which has now been created. The list could go on. The point they all illustrate is that most of the major developments in socialist demands, policies and forms of organisation are going on in non-party frameworks, though benefiting from the work of those who are members of socialist parties.

A final indication of this is the way that party journals themselves, if they really want to expand their sales and their influence, have to turn away from providing only a party framework of discussion and open up their pages to the rest of the Left. The point I am making in all this is not an anti-party point, but more an argument that those who, for many good reasons are in socialist parties, should, with the rest of us, direct their energies towards these alliances. For I would argue that it is out of these alliances that a really effective alternative to the Tories and Labourism perhaps can be built. The political forms which that alternative

eventually takes (eg, whether it is a new party or not) will depend a lot on how far and how quickly the Labour Left come up against insurmountable obstacles in transforming the Labour Party.

### Alliances — the difficult area

As Cath and Tricia recognise, creating socialist alliances is not going to be easy. So far I have talked only about the kind of alliances which are least difficult: alliances between socialists from different traditions but facing the same problems, suffering the same oppression and engaged in the same struggles. The more difficult alliances are between people suffering different oppressions, often with conflicting immediate interests, and different priorities for their struggles; for example between socialist and feminist women and male trade unionists or between trade unionists in industry and those in the social services.

<sup>1</sup> Published as a book by Pluto £2.95 this month.

<sup>2</sup> Their report *State Intervention in Industry, a Workers Inquiry* is out now, published by Coventry, Liverpool, Newcastle and North Tyneside Trades Councils, and available from 5 Queen St, Newcastle upon Tyne 1. Cost £2.

<sup>3</sup> For instance the Joint Forum of Combines which includes the Dunlop Combine Committee, the Lucas Aerospace Combine Committee, the Metal Box Combine Committee, the Vickers Combine Committee, the Power Engineering Trade Union Committee, and the Thorn/EMI Combine Committee. They have produced a pamphlet stating the case for combine committees. It is entitled 'Trade union strategy in the face of corporate power'. It is available from Ron Mills, 163 Waverley Green Rd, Olten, Solihull, West Midlands. Cost 25p.

Though Tricia and Cath are hopeful that these divisions can be overcome; they do not in their article give any reasons why. They do not, for instance, point to any underlying common interests between feminists and socialist men which might, with effort on the part of both groups, men especially, make unity around common political objectives possible. In fact at one point they seem to reject such a notion as 'humanist', when they criticise Sheila Rowbotham for suggesting such a common interest. Sheila is not suggesting that the oppression of women and the exploitation of the working class is the same. Or that it can all be understood under the general rubric of 'hierarchy'. She is not denying that the relations which historically and structurally subordinate women are specific and need to be theorised as such. (Whether the concept 'patriarchy' is a useful way of summarising these relations is another

question; being critical of one theoretical concept does not mean you are against the need for a specific theorisation of women's oppression. Such a theorisation may need a much more complex combination of theories and concepts.) But she is saying that the connections between class power and male domination are such that socialist and working class men have something to gain from the liberation of women as we women have from the abolition of class power. That does not mean that it will be an easy going matter, to work out the policies and ways of organising which express those common interests.

I don't have space to say more about the problems here, but at this stage an important step would be for socialist and trade unionist men to be involved more directly in discussion of feminist analyses and policies. Socialist feminists are increasingly taking on

general economic and political problems and elaborating the insights which feminist perspectives provide. But there are very few forums, sufficiently close to experience and activity, where these and other new developments in socialist policies, analysis and tactics can work through areas of complementarity and conflict.

When we first decided, under pressure, to organise the Fragments conference in Leeds in August our purpose was to encourage such forums for contact and debate to develop, locally and nationally. The one day conference illustrated many of the difficulties. But there seemed to be sufficient sense of the need for such links, for further steps to be taken. Those who volunteered to carry out the overwhelming vote for a second conference, preceded by local discussions are meeting this month. No doubt you will be hearing of their plans in the near future. •