

CHARGE OF THE NEW RED BRIGADE

By Matt Seaton

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By global standards, 20th Century Britain has been remarkably free from political violence. Red Action hope to change all that. Angry, ruthless and close to the IRA, they preach socialism through terror.

One morning in January, two years ago, a couple of cheerful-looking middle-aged men were strolling up Knightsbridge together. One was balding and wearing a light mac, the other, in a dark suit and carrying a briefcase, maybe needed a haircut but otherwise was smart enough. They looked for all the world like a pair of salesmen sharing a joke on their way to work. It was a little after 9am and the day was mild but overcast. As they passed Harrods, the taller one in the suit reached into the left-hand pocket of his jacket, pulled out a small package and dropped it into a metal litterbin. It could have been a fast-food carton, the remains of a breakfast grabbed on the hoof. They were smiling again; another joke, perhaps, as they went on their way.

Just over half an hour later, at 9.40am, the litterbin exploded. The package contained approximately 1lb of Semtex. "There was glass everywhere and great lumps of metal sprayed across the roadway," one witness said. The police, who - along with the Samaritans — had received a telephone warning from the IRA at 9.14am, were still clearing the area outside and searching inside the store when the device exploded. Fortunately no one was close enough to be seriously hurt, although four people received treatment for cuts and shock. But the bomb wrecked the shopfront, shredding the green and gold canopies and leaving a twisted, naked mannequin lying facedown on the pavement as an eerie reminder of what bombs do to human bodies. The cost of damage and lost sales was estimated at £1m.

Six days later, the IRA struck again; this time a bomb was placed on a Network SouthEast train from Victoria to Ramsgate. The train was cleared before it went off, and there were no casualties, despite a "misleading" warning.

The police had already been studying the video from the Harrods security cameras, and conducting the laborious trawl to match freeze-frame images from the video with stills held in police and security service records. But there had, it seems, been no match — and no arrests.

Then, on 2 March, the police released images from the security video, which clearly showed the two men who planted the Harrods bomb. This is not the police's favourite line of action; as a police officer later explained: "If you put this material out to the public, your suspects may just disappear. It's a gamble."

But it seemed to be the only line of action left. The head of the anti-terrorist branch of the Met, Commander David Tucker, made a personal appeal: "These men may rent a

room at your guest-house or hotel, or be new neighbours in your street.” The unmistakable subtext was that the suspects were two recent arrivals: perhaps not directly from the Irish Republic or Ulster, but of course Irish. This turned out to be a misdirection — an indication of just how far from the truth the police still were. Even so, the gamble paid off: within hours of the first broadcast, the police received a tip-off from a member of the public who recognised one of the men.

The same afternoon, police burst into Patrick Hayes’s basement flat in Walford Road, Stoke Newington, north London, armed with firearms and truncheons, and arrested Hayes, 41, and 51 year-old Jan Taylor. Before the pair were overpowered, and bundled bleeding into vans, one of them fired three shots at the oncoming policemen, without hitting any of them. Among the items found in the flat were a box containing 22lb of Semtex, hand-guns, a sock full of bullets, several electronic detonators and timing devices, and keys to a lock-up garage in Muswell Hill from which a large quantity of home-made explosive was later recovered.

It was all much as one might expect, apart from the identity of the suspects themselves. For the two IRA men were not just off the ferry from Dun Laoghaire, nor even from Ireland at all. They were English through and through and had lived in London for at least 20 years.

At the end of their trial in May 1994, Hayes and Taylor were both sentenced to 30 years for the Harrods and Ramsgate train bombings. Hayes was also linked forensically to several huge lorry bombs of the type, which destroyed the Baltic Exchange and devastated Bishopsgate, including one which failed to explode under Canary Wharf. But the main interest at the trial lay in the fact that Hayes and Taylor were both indisputably English. Hayes, it was said, had one Irish grandparent, which might be sufficient to qualify for the Republic’s football squad but hardly seemed the typical background of an IRA volunteer. This was why the police had initially been so perplexed. As one police source put it: “There was a gap in our intelligence. It is almost without precedent for two born-and-bred Englishmen to be terrorists at this level. By any objective analysis these people would not be considered as IRA suspects.”

This explanation was thoroughly acceptable to public opinion, appealing as it did to the ingenuous but widely-held view that English folk are fundamentally decent, peace-loving and democratic, and that terrorism is just something ugly that comes from Ireland. But what if this popular complacency were misplaced? What if the “gap” between Englishmen and terrorism were smaller than it seemed?

In a photograph of Hayes’s flat released by the police after his arrest, an AK47 assault rifle lies on the floor, while a copy of Socialist Worker lies on a chair. The juxtaposition is misleading, but only just. The SWP is noisy but essentially harmless, but not far to the left of it is an altogether more shadowy group, to which Hayes belonged, and to which conventional stereotypes of peace-loving Englishmen do not apply. This is a domestic, non-Irish organisation which not only endorses Republican Para militarism but enthusiastically espouses the use of violence against its own political adversaries in

Britain. The name of this group is Red Action.

Patrick Hayes was an intelligent working-class boy from Willesden who gained a degree in business studies at the Polytechnic of Central London. He later specialised in computers and worked for J Sainsbury from 1987 to 1990 as a programmer and analyst. Married with three children, he divorced in 1988. At his last job before his arrest, for the Research Institute of the Daiwa investment banking group (from which he was made redundant in 1992), he was remembered only as “an unremarkable employee”.

In fact, Hayes was very remarkable. Besides running a big IRA bombing campaign, he was a leading member of Red Action, and his political associates maintain that “he was heavily involved” in their anti-Fascist activities, legal and illegal, “playing a crucial role, right up until he was lifted [for the terrorist offences]”. As long ago as 1981 he fought in what was the nascent Red Action’s first violent clash with the National Front, while as recently as 1991, according to Red Action colleagues, he was the chief steward for a 4,000-strong march through Brick Lane and Bethnal Green by Anti-Fascist Action (a more broadly-based group for which Red Action provides much of the leadership but by no means all the membership), a position which involved negotiating with the police, putting him on “tea and biscuits” terms with a local chief superintendent.

Jan Taylor was also known to the police. He was a former soldier in the British Army from Bristol who had served in Cyprus (though not in Northern Ireland) and had been awarded a UN peace medal. A corporal at the time of his discharge in 1973, Taylor went on to work for British Telecom, though at the time of his arrest he was stacking shelves at Tesco in Bethnal Green. Despite his Army career, his active support for Republicanism went back some years: he had a conviction from 1984 for selling an IRA calendar in a pub in Hammersmith.

But neither Hayes nor Taylor was essentially or originally an Irish nationalist; each was recruited to terrorism by pure revolutionary ideology. To those who think that the embourgeoisement of the May ‘68 generation and the collapse of communism in 1989 have put paid to 200 years of Jacobin excess, this may come as nasty shock. Even the security services, whom the British taxpayer employs to be paranoid about subversives, were apparently lackadaical in their assessment of exactly what Red Action is capable of. But Hayes and Taylor were no freaks; there are unquestionably others like them in Red Action who would — given the chance — do what they did.

My first face-to-face encounter with Red Action takes place in a pub in Holloway, north London. After writing to the PO Box number published in their paper, RedAction (available in left-wing bookshops), I have received a telephone call inviting me to meet two of its members in a bar near Highbury and Islington station, where I am to make myself conspicuous by carrying a copy of the Independent on Sunday. It’s only just opening time on a Sunday evening and the pub is nearly empty; fairly soon I think I spy my men, but they take their time finishing their pints before coming over to identify themselves to me. We immediately move to a quieter pub (an Irish one) — a procedure

which does nothing to calm my nervous state.

Bill and Joe look like a pair of average blue-collar blokes out for a drink. They are wearing Umbro and Russell Athletic sweatshirts, jeans, car-coat-style jackets and Timberland-type boots; the only reason that you might avoid eye-contact, if you found yourself across the bar from them, is because they look as though they might be football casuals - and because they're conspicuously large. A conservative estimate would put Bill, a 28-year-old Londoner, at 6ft 3in and 16 stone; Joe, aged 39 and of Irish origin, is smaller (perhaps about 6ft), and wears a rather trendy pair of glasses, giving him an almost donnish air. But he too has a physical presence that goes beyond mere self-assurance.

After a few pints, things warm up a bit: soon everyone is affable — even an absent friend like Pat Hayes is “a very affable bloke”, I am told. Every now and then, though, I am brought up short by the realisation that I'm sharing rounds with two men who help to run a semi-legal, semi-paramilitary group, and who believe absolutely in the efficacy of political violence.

Red Action, they tell me, is primarily an anti-fascist group. Its founders were involved in security for the Anti-Nazi League and the Rock Against Racism concerts in the late Seventies, which put them in the front line of physical confrontation with the National Front (Red Action's hard core is still called the “Stewards Group”), but were expelled from the SWP in 1981 for “squadism”, or organising gangs of street-fighters. Since then, their main raison -d'être, has been to fight the British National Party and similar groups, notably the sinister Combat 18. Joe speaks proudly of their successes in this area. “We've stopped them becoming a national organisation,” he says. “They have a national organisation, but they can't operate nationally.” Red Action itself aims to have a national organisation. Joe and Bill are evasive about the exact size and disposition of the membership, and given the clandestine nature of the group and its activities it is difficult to make definite statements about the way it works. But a reasonable estimate would be that it comprises about 20-30 branches with an average of 10-15 members in each. It is based mainly in the chief metropolitan centres, notably London, Manchester, Leeds and Glasgow, and is predominantly, although not exclusively, male. It has a democratic constitution (with an annual delegate conference) for deciding questions of general policy and direction, but for specific actions involving violence and illegality a paramilitary-style command structure takes over, operating through cells for reasons of security. Until recently Red Action has been mainly concerned with responding to fascist violence, but the pre-emptive strike has long been a favoured tactic, and the members I spoke to felt that they had more or less quashed fascism and were impatient to widen the scope of their activities.

Given its modest size, Red Action's coverage even of the big cities, where it has some strength, is patchy: in London, for instance, Red Action rules the roost in the north, but the south-east, from Bermondsey out to Bexley Heath, still belongs largely to the fascists. Joe and Bill guess that roughly half their members are unemployed at any one time; the others tend to work in manual trades, either in the public sector or casually on

building sites and the like. The working-class bias of Red Action's composition makes it something of an exception in the contemporary left-wing political scene.

The rest of the left, Joe says, regard Red Action as pariahs, but they are quite content with this, dismissing the left as "middle-class wankers". Fascism is primarily a politics of the white working class, and the increasingly middle-class and student-oriented left "don't go there," says Bill. The solution, as they see it, to the problem of Fascism, is to beat it off the streets: "If you show people — young, working class youth especially — who's winning, then they will join you, not the Fash."

Doesn't this attract the wrong sort of member, headcases who are only there for the fighting? Joe's answer is pure pragmatism: "You don't need to be a Marxist intellectual to hit someone over the head with a beer bottle." But it also follows, says Bill, that "the politicals have got to be the most committed of the street fighters. We've learnt from Ireland, it must be the political dog wagging the violent tail."

The tail can be very violent indeed. A recent RedAction Scottish Bulletin reports an encounter in Glasgow with a BNP skinhead known as "Swastika Face" because of his tattoo. Several "concerned citizens" attacked him and another fascist as they were stickering in central Glasgow: "Swastika Face" had the contents of a skip bashed over his head and took to his heels, finding sanctuary in a nearby Nazi pub . . . where another five fascists offered sympathy and advice. But no sooner had he wiped the blood and dirt from his napper, than he was smashed in the face with a hammer as he emerged from the pub toilet. Not one of the five fascists in the pub attempted to come to his aid. A comic touch was added when the terror-struck barman vaulted the bar and headed off.., into the night!"

The tactic, Joe explains approvingly, is to "make an example of them. The message is 'Don't come on our manors.'" This is not the politics of committees and voting procedures - this is street-level politics, "from the rougher end of the market", as Joe says. Violence is part of the currency, away of making a point in an argument.

All the leading members of Red Action — the "Stewards Group" — have at different times been in court, claims Joe, on a range of serious charges, including GBH "with intent". When they go on an action, perhaps to attack a pub where Fascists are meeting, they are, Joe says, "tooled as appropriate". "Tools" will include pickaxe handles, coshes and hammers.

In the early days, Red Action's activists were often hard to distinguish from the right-wing skinheads they fought: they wore the same Harrington jackets, big boots, short jeans and shorter haircuts. Today, the two groups have grown apart sartorially (Red Action now tend to favour the more up-town style of football "casuals"), but in other respects they still have much in common: similar origins and recruiting grounds — neglected, white, working-class housing estates — and a similar enthusiasm for violence and intimidation. They also share an interest in Irish politics. Far-right groups such as Combat 18 and the British National Party have a tradition of links with loyalist

paramilitaries; Red Action with the IRA and, in the past, the Irish National Liberation Army. They mirror one another, almost as if each needed the other. And of course in one sense they do: you cannot fight without an enemy.

“We don’t have contempt for the Fascists,” says Bill. “They’re working-class people who do low-paid, shitty jobs, and they want change.” Joe adds: “The Fash have ambition. The left has no ambition. We have more ambition.”

A few weeks later I join Red Action again for an “action” in Glasgow. Since 1990, when the BNP proclaimed that Scotland was its biggest growth area, Red Action has been intent on keeping Scottish Fascists “under the cosh”. Glasgow is their main battleground, not least because of the city’s strong communities of Irish immigrants, from both sides of the sectarian divide. Rangers is traditionally the Protestant team, and the BNP recruits actively among its casuals, the InterCity Firm. Several pubs in Glasgow, according to Red Action, are known to support the UDA or UVF. Meanwhile, Red Action finds solid support among the Republican-inclined Celtic supporters, whose fanzine is entitled *Tiocfaidh Ar La!* (a Fenian slogan, pronounced, roughly, “chucky ahla” and meaning “Our day will come”).

A second phone-call from London Red Action has instructed me to wait at a pub near Glasgow’s George Square at midday, and, as before, I am met — this time by Stevie and Kieran. I am expecting another pair of man-mountains, and so it is momentarily reassuring to find that both are relatively slight. Stevie, who is 30, is only 5ft 3in; but, as a former football hooligan, he is probably as hard as the next man. Kieran, though younger (at 25), has an air of flinty determination. There is a note of real satisfaction in his voice when he recalls how “Swastika Face” was “cabbaged”.

The plan of action for this Saturday is simply to patrol the pubs in central Glasgow, to confront any Fascists or, if none is found, then just to “put down a marker”. Most of the 16 or so people in our group belong to Anti-Fascist Action rather than Red Action proper. AFA contains a broader range of activists than Red Action— some students, non-aligned lefties, former hunt saboteurs, some black people and football casuals — not all of whom share Red Action’s Irish Republican views. But everyone here today seems in sympathy with the immediate objectives of the Red Action hard-core who are directing activities.

There has been a small Scottish TUC sponsored anti-racism march that morning, and AFA expects that there will be some Fash around, looking for an opportunity to attack dispersing marchers. AFA’s tactic is not to join the march, which they regard as an easy target for a mob, but to surprise the BNP men and strike them pre-emptively where there is no policing.

By about 1pm, the whole party is in the pub, waiting for the signal from Stevie and Kieran to move off. Apart from Stevie and Kieran, there is one other full-time Red Action member, Dave, and another, named Brian, who is a “supporting member” (a potential member on a kind of probationary period). The remainder of the group includes two

women, only one of whom joins the patrol, and about half a dozen Celtic casuals, who are easy enough to spot because they look like working-class Glaswegians who go to the football, whereas most of the rest of the AFA group dress in a more self-consciously nonconformist fashion. Because of the police presence in the city centre, no one is carrying anything that could be deemed an offensive weapon.

Kieran gets up to check that the coast is clear in George Square; earlier, he has spotted two men in plain clothes whom he has identified as Special Branch. The group congregates for a few minutes outside the pub before moving off towards the nearby Central Station. There are two pubs to check in this area. The one we visit first is well-known as a Fascist meeting-place. In 1991 the BNP tried to hold a big rally there, with its national organiser, John Tyndall. According to the subsequent Red Action report, Tyndall had to be smuggled out by an underground passage when an aggressive AFA counter-demonstration laid siege to the pub.

It is about 1pm when we enter the pub. There is no obvious response from anyone already there, so members of the AFA group quickly buy drinks from the bar. The clientele is what you'd expect in a pub near a station on Saturday lunchtime — a mixture of beer-bruised middle-aged men and younger men in small groups who, in the circumstances of our visit to this pub, all look more or less mean. It doesn't seem a good idea to look too long in any particular direction or to catch anyone's eye.

Suddenly, there is some movement from people in our group away from the bar, and a couple of tables halfway across the saloon are quickly occupied. The tension has risen appreciably. I find Kieran next to me, still near the door by which we've entered, and ask him what is going on. He explains that a group of seven or eight casually but quite smartly dressed lads, sitting on the far side of the room, are certainly, Rangers fans and suspected BNP supporters. While we speak, one of them gets up, putting on a bomber jacket, and makes his way past us and on to the toilets. The group are evidently now aware of the trespass by AFA, and if they do not know who their visitors are, then it is soon made clear by one of our group going over to them and handing over a couple of AFA leaflets, by way of a calling-card. They look nervous now, uncertain what to do. The one who's gone to the toilets meets a mate at the bar, and without a word or gesture they both leave the pub.

Kieran is providing a running commentary for my benefit, and adds that if he is speaking faster than normal it's because the adrenalin is pumping. I notice that another AFA member standing beside us is wearing gloves, although it is warm outside. I ask him why. "It's to hide a knuckle-duster. Well, not a knuckle-duster, but a ring which works like one," he explains matter-of-factly. And I can see a raised jagged outline on the index finger of his right hand beneath the flimsy acrylic of the gloves.

We have been there for more than five minutes and it still isn't clear whether we have cornered any genuine Fascists. There are no known faces, it seems, among this particular group of Rangers casuals. But the atmosphere of menace continues: the AFA strategy is first to challenge them over whether they support the BNP and then either to

face them down and force them to leave the pub, or to meet them in a confrontation if they're prepared to make a fight of it. They are outnumbered and trapped, and so, by twos and threes, they get up and leave the pub quickly and discreetly. Their retreat is a tactical victory for the AFA mob, who, even if they have not actually attacked any Fascists, have intimidated a group of football hooligans with likely BNP links or sympathies into a humiliating withdrawal from their own "manor".

But the disappointment of the AFA members, and especially of the Celtic crew, is palpable. Leaving the pub soon afterwards, the group turns its attention to its other target pub, a more modern affair with tiled floors and Formica surfaces. It's the kind of bar that looks as though it doesn't cleaned so much as just hosed down at the end of each day. The tension has relaxed and drinks are bought again.

On the way over I've been talking to a Celtic casual called Iain, who seems delighted to find a journalist with the group. A skinny lad of 21, he looks like a schoolboy on a field trip. And he seems almost in a hurry to confide his past misdemeanours, not so much out of bravura, but like a kid "fessing up" and asking for other offences to be taken into account. He tells me how the Rangers, and Celtic mobs have made a date for a pitched battle the following week. Sensing a lull in the proceedings, I offer to buy him a drink

I am waiting to get back my change from his lager and my Guinness when it becomes apparent that something is up. All of a sudden I am the only member of the group left in the pub. Absurdly, I carry the pints half-way to the door, sipping them so as not to spill them, and then abandon them on a table to see what's going on.

I get outside just in time to see two figures racing across the concourse towards the main entrance, being chased in an arc by the AFA crew, who aim kicks and blows as their paths intercept the fugitives. A beer glass flies in their direction, missing its target and bursting against the adjacent wall. The spectacle probably lasts about three seconds, but has an oddly stagey air. Exeunt, pursued by hooligans.

I follow as fast as I inconspicuously can with the AFA rearguard, but it soon becomes impossible to see what's happening through the crowds of Saturday shoppers in Union Street and Gordon Street. Several of us give up the chase, and I stand for a moment by Stevie and Eddy, the Celtic casual who first challenged the suspected Fascists as they came down from a bar in the station that we had not checked. Eddy put in the first blow after the guy he confronted had failed to show sufficiently enthusiastic disavowal when asked: "Are you BNP?" Now he is jubilant. "I've shot my load in my pants," he cries, holding his jeans and hopping from one leg to the other as if they were indeed soiled. Stevie laughs with him. Then everyone splits, and right on cue comes the sound of approaching police sirens.

Only an hour later do I learn the full story. Shortly after we lost track of them, the rest of the group overhauled their men further up the street. According to Kieran, one stumbled and fell as he ran, catching several kicks to his skull as his attackers sprinted by. The other was felled with a blow to the head and kicked where he lay. Then the AFA gang

scattered, leaving two prostrate bodies on the pavement among the shoppers. The man with the ring I'd spoken to earlier had had to get rid of his gloves, because of the blood on them. The Glasgow police do not appear to have become involved, however: when I ask them subsequently, they are only able to tell me that the earlier STUC march passed without incident.

There is an air of warm satisfaction in the pub where we meet up later. No one seems to want to enquire too closely into the possibility that the pair of unfortunates stamped with AFA's calling-card may have had no formal links with the BNP; if they were Proddie football casualties, guilt by association will suffice.

In a sense, it is all a bit disappointing, a bit innocent, even: just an ordinary Saturday punch-up such as occurs in most British cities, irrespective of politics. But this would be a misleading and complacent conclusion: street-fighting with Fascist football hooligans is only a part of Red Action's agenda. Its philosophy that violence is sound political praxis leads it in other directions besides.

One of the last things that Stevie tells me as I am leaving Glasgow is: "If you look at the Irish in Britain and where Red Action members are, there is a direct correlation." He did not mean that all of RA's members are Irish; most are not. But many, particularly in Scotland and the North-west, are second- or third-generation Irish. Their Republicanism is not the sentimental nationalism of the IRA's Boston and New York supporters, a diaspora fantasy, but an identity nurtured by its close proximity to the island of Ireland and sharpened by a sense of having prospered little themselves on the main-land. They feel that they have a personal stake in a united Ireland: if "the Boys" beat the Brits out of the Six Counties, they can reclaim the birthright that was forfeited by emigration all those years ago — *Tiocfaidh Ar La!*

Apart from responding to the link between the far right in Britain and Ulster Loyalism, the other unifying theme between Red Action and hard-core Republicanism is, the readiness to employ paramilitary violence. Both Bill and Joe reject the idea that Pat Hayes made an implausible move by graduating from RA activity to becoming part of one of the IRA's most dangerous mainland active service units: "We wouldn't consider that a quantum leap. It would be a personal decision, but it would be a logical extension of the politics anyway," and they point to another RA member who made a similar "quantum leap" into Republican terrorist activity.

Liam Heffernan, "Hefty" to his friends, was found guilty in December 1993 of conspiracy to steal explosives and to cause explosions, as well as firearms offences. Accused of being a member of an INLA active service unit, he received a 23-year sentence. He was arrested — along with another INLA man (from Limerick), Martin McMonagle — in February that year, as they attempted to steal explosives from Westberry quarry in Somerset.

Heffernan, like Hayes, was very active in Red Action's anti-Fascist activity in the late 1980s. Joe tells me of one encounter with some south London Fascists in Holloway

Road Underground station, which left several of them run-fling away down the tunnel itself to escape Heffernan and his fellow Red Action heavies. Although born and brought up in Manchester, Heffernan had “got romantically involved” with a woman in Northern Ireland; he had married and moved to Belfast.

Heffernan met his wife on one of Red Action’s regular excursions to the province. Every August RA members make a pilgrimage to the nationalist Springhill Festival. Last year, Joe and Bill claim, they were told that there was to be a ceasefire a fortnight before the IRA announced its “complete cessation of military operations” on 31 August. Red Action also sent over delegations last year with the co-operation of Sinn Fein’s “Prisoner of War” department. The purpose of these links is not only to maintain established connections, but is also explicitly for the benefit of “supporting members”. For these apprentice revolutionaries, like the one I met in Glasgow, a visit to Northern Ireland is seen as the ultimate test. Joe explains: “We use it primarily as a crash-course education for new members. Sometimes people fuck off and you never see them again. Better to find out now than later. But other people begin to know what it’s about. . .”

Northern Ireland has long been a litmus test for the far left: while most groups from the hard left in the Labour Party and beyond have traditionally paid lip-service to the cause of a united Ireland, all but those wishing to prove themselves “true revolutionaries” have balked at active assistance for the armed wing of the Republican movement. One of the early exceptions, since the beginning of the current round of the Troubles, was the Angry Brigade, which in the early 1970’s attempted to establish links with the IRA but was given short shrift. Its naïve student radicalism was mercilessly parodied in Doris Lessing’s *The Good Terrorist*, in which the groupuscule of young communist squatters splits over whether to join the IRA — as if the IRA would have an interest either way.

The conventional wisdom, in the words of Peter Wright, author of *Spycatcher*, is that the far left in Britain is about as threatening as “a pond full of ducks”, but in Red Action’s case there seems to be some substance to the claim that the rest of the left are impostors and that they are a serious threat to the Establishment. By any measure, the entries of Hayes into the IRA and Heffernan into the INLA are landmark events, indicating a measure of trust earned by more than a decade of effective solidarity work. It would be reasonable to assume that, since Red Action’s inception, its members have given assistance of all kinds and at all levels to the cause of Irish Republicanism, both to the IRA and to the INIA (prior to the INLA’s auto-liquidation in 1987 amid vicious feuding).

The question is — with a ceasefire and peace talks in Northern Ireland on one hand, and the relative success of Anti-Fascist Action on the other — where do Red Action go from here? Red Action’s activists are guarded about this, partly because they have not yet met to decide on their future course. But the likelihood is that they will pursue their distinctive brand of street politics, including the use of violence if necessary, by picking issues close to what they see as their natural constituency — the dispossessed working class often referred to (with peculiarly left-wing snobbery) as the lumpenproletariat.

In that sense, RA's anti-Fascist activity may be seen as a rehearsal for more conventional revolutionary socialist objectives — redistribution via insurrectionary self-help. Does this mean that Red Action now poses a threat to ordinary citizens as well as to Fascists? Can we expect IRA-style atrocities in the name of socialism in Britain? A Scotland Yard source says that police expectation of Red Action is two-fold: first that "there may be some forging of closer links with revolutionary groups on the Continent, particularly where those groups are involved in violent clashes with Fascists"; and secondly that RA will "associate themselves with causes [other than Ireland] where they see potential opportunity for the overthrow of the British government."

With Special Branch now apparently so short of subversives to trail that it has started "targeting" people who object to road-building schemes, the monitoring of Red Action is bound to intensify. Their next move may be of the bread-and-butter variety, perhaps involving housing, or jobs or benefits. It might be a rent strike, organised in rundown estates which can be turned into defensible pockets of resistance, temporary no-go areas — Free Derry comes to Free Hackney. If so, Red Action will increasingly find itself in direct confrontation with the police. But this is guesswork, for if Red Action has learnt anything from the IRA it is the value of being unpredictable. With two "boys" in prison for the Republican cause, though, Red Action is buoyed up with confidence; Joe is deadly serious when he says: "We have more ambition."