



Back to the wall . . . Despite the British Right's in-fighting, the National Front still tries to attract supporters. This newspaper-seller was at Newcastle United's ground

Digging in to fight fascism

David Rose on a resurgence in the war against racism

SINCE its launch in the summer of 1985, Anti-Fascist Action has been growing quietly.

Determined from its inception to avoid the pitfalls of Trotskyite sectarianism and media hype which befell its predecessor of the late 1970s, the Anti-Nazi League, the organisation sports more than 30 local groups and numerous affiliates, and tomorrow week expects to show its strength by participating in a European-wide Day of Action.

The result of a conference of anti-fascist groups in Stockholm last February, this occasion marks the eve of the first round of polling in the French presidential elections, in which Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front is expected to poll up to four million votes.

Mr Unmesh Desai, an AFA committee member, acknowledges that the main elements of the British Right — the National Front and British National Party — may, by splitting into factions, have lost most of the electoral ground and respectability they enjoyed during the heyday of the old ANL and its cultural offshoot, Rock Against Racism.

But, he warns, the lesson that racism has become a potent force in mainstream French politics must not be forgotten in this country.

As part of a series of activities across the country, AFA will march from the Home Office to present a petition to the French embassy, to be followed by a rally in Hyde Park. It is also the anniversary of the death of Blair Peach in Southall, west London, who died after being beaten by police during an ANL counter-demonstration against the NF, and a further rally and wreath-laying ceremony will take place there later in the day.

Mr Desai says the apparent lack of cohesion on the British Right has done little to lessen its potential to do harm. In recent years, fascist activists have been convicted of offences including incitement to racial hatred, serious assault, murder and bomb-making.

The NF and its offshoots have increased their agitation and recruitment on the football terraces, as a report about Leeds United showed earlier this month.

A new and sinister focus for extreme right-wing recruitment is the "White Noise" rock music circuit: a concert by racist groups in London two weeks ago attracted more than 800 skinhead sympathisers.

"Most black organisations are failing to meet this challenge altogether," says Mr Desai. "They have become institutionalised and inward-looking, addressing themselves to their own problems and preaching to the converted white left.

"It is essential, however, to work to change attitudes within the white working class: a whole generation is growing up without an effective counter to organised and semi-organised racist politics."

The approach is reflected in the first stirrings of a music-based youth movement formed specifically in opposition to White Noise: a series of anti-fascist groups, formed around popular local bands, mixing rock with anti-racist politics.

An example of local and trade union activity is the present strike by members of the Civil and Public Services Association at the social security office in Hither Green, south London, in protest at management's threat to dismiss staff who refuse to work with Mr Malcolm Skeggs, a BNP organiser and former NF parliamentary candidate, who was sacked by Lewisham council for photocopying a neo-Nazi organisation's booklist.

Local roots form the basic organisation of AFA, its national network, co-ordinated through the magazine Searchlight, enables larger-scale mobilisation.

One such mobilisation may become necessary later this year in Exeter, where the Labour council has organised three months of celebrations to commemorate the landing of William of Orange in 1688.

The NF has already announced its intention to bring supporters to some of the events arousing fears they will attempt to use them as an opportunity to repeat their violent show of strength in Bridgwater, Somerset, the constituency of the Northern Ireland Secretary, Mr Tom King, in November 1986, the first anniversary of the Anglo-Irish agreement.