

The hard left: White working class football supporters have always been targeted by the racist ri...

Eimer, David

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The hard left

White working class football supporters have always been targeted by the racist right. But now an anti-fascist group is attracting support on the terraces — and it's ready to fight fire with fire. **David Eimer** meets the men and women prepared to put the boot in for the left cause

••• **When** Derek Beackon won a council seat in London's Isle of Dogs on September 16, 1993, not everyone was surprised by the British National Party's success. For the past two years, Anti-Fascist Action had been warning that the far right was organised — and winning. And now AFA is preaching a militant form of protest.

Formed in 1985 by veterans of the Anti-Nazi League (ANL), it is a nationwide organisation which promotes a dual policy of confronting the far right ideologically — and physically. The group makes no apologies about what that kind of work can entail.

"It's political violence," says AFA activist Danny. "The fascists use it because they think it works and if they think it works, you can't do any better than doing it on them, only a lot harder. Whatever's necessary to cause them to desist from what they're doing."

Danny should know: he's been involved in combating the far right since the seventies, when he ran with Reds Against The Nazis, a group of Manchester United fans who fought the National Front. Now he's

one of the top men (or what AFA calls "fighting stewards"), responsible for controlling what they claim is anything from 20 to 150 people in street confrontations. Danny sees the use of violence as a necessary antidote to what he sees as the far right's increasing influence and the corresponding rise in racial incidents recorded by the police: 9,762 in England and Wales last year.

"The whole reason for the violence is that they want people to stay away, to let them do what they want to do," Danny explains. "If you don't attack them, they're free to organise politically. But if you attack them, they can't do that... that's the relevance of violence, it's not something you want to do."

Like most AFA members, Danny comes from the constituency that the British National Party (BNP) tries to recruit from: white working class youths from depressed areas with a high proportion of ethnic minorities; and it's their opinions that dominate the organisation. That, in itself, sets AFA apart from the ANL or Youth Against Racism In Europe (YRE); AFA is openly contemptuous of the students and "smellies" who go on marches and then return to their

homes in areas where the BNP tends not to be active.

The ANL and the black-led Anti-Racist Alliance (ARA) were seen as the voice of the anti-racists. With celebrities like Lenny Henry and Stephen Fry backing them, and with frequent references to their successful campaign against the National Front in the late seventies, the ANL claimed that the subsequent defeat of the BNP in Millwall showed that its policy of rallies, marches and gigs was working. But although the BNP lost its seat, its share of the vote was 30 per cent up on the previous council election, even though the turnout was 70 per cent, the highest ever recorded. It is statistics like these that appear to be prompting increasing numbers of people to question whether the ANL's tactics are effective. Also, the ANL is controlled by the Socialist Workers Party — they share the same leadership — while the YRE has close links with Militant. In contrast, AFA purport to push no political line beyond the defeat of fascism, although there is nothing to stop individual members joining other groups.

Instead, AFA challenges the BNP on territory that is closed to the ANL.

the ARA and YRE. So, just as the BNP has always seen football fans as a fertile source of recruits, AFA is particularly active in and around soccer grounds.

“Our attitude has been that most people aren’t fascists or anti-fascists,” points out John from Manchester AFA. “They’re in the middle — and sometimes open to persuasion from both. With football it tends to come from the right.”

Manchester AFA tries to redress that balance via the United fanzine Red Attitude; crucially, though, all such efforts are by AFA members who would be at the football anyway. “We’re not like Sky TV — here this week and there next week. There’s no point turning up at a club you don’t support just to peddle politics,” Danny says.

Football is also where AFA finds most of its so-called “street fighters”. “The thing is you get people ready-made,” explains Jo, another AFA leader. “If they come from football, they know how to deal with the police, they understand the gang mentality, they know how to fight and understand the psychology of the other mob.”

This is particularly relevant in Scotland, where the far right are closely tied to Ulster Loyalism; Celtic and Hibernian supporters lead the battle against the BNP, who in turn have a heavy presence amongst Rangers fans. “It’s been a straight physical war,” admits Sean from Glasgow AFA. “If they hit one of ours, we hit three of them. We’re making it clear that the anti-fascists are setting the agenda.”

But AFA is more than just a sophisticated football firm. It produces its own magazine, Fighting Talk, and has links with similar

groups elsewhere in Europe, like Reflex in France and the German Autonome Antifa (M).

Many AFA members are women. Marion, for instance, is a regional organiser based in the Home Counties. A former skinhead who flirted with the far right in the early eighties (“I went through a stage of being a complete racist”), she now runs one of the numerous AFA branches around the country, gathering and collating intelligence about the far right in her area, as well as organising meetings and fund-raising events.

Marion dismisses criticisms that the use of violence, for whatever cause, is insupportable. “Violence isn’t the issue, it’s a tactic. It’s about disillusioning and intimidating the fascists,” she says. “You don’t feel guilty about it; politically it was the right thing to do.”

Their willingness to use violence makes the AFA a clandestine organisation. Breaking up BNP meetings, kicking its paper sales off the streets and preventing its bands from holding money-making gigs have brought AFA into conflict with the law, and at least three AFA members have served prison terms for their part in such events.

But they claim precedents for what they do. In the thirties, Mosley’s British Union of Fascists (BUF) frequently encountered physical opposition, most notably at the Battle of Cable Street in 1936 when thousands of people turned out on the streets to prevent them marching through the East End.

And immediately after the second world war, the 43 Group — a collection of mainly Jewish ex-servicemen — used its military training to play a major part in destroying the BUF’s

Scenes from an AFA video . . . ‘street fighters’ attack a skinhead they identified as a ‘BNP boot boy’ in Carnaby Street

short-lived successor, the Union Movement.

As its name suggests, AFA is a negative reaction to the resurgence of the far right in the UK. The BNP sensed in the Isle of Dogs that a vacuum had been created which it could fill. Yet the ARA is in the throes of an internal power struggle that saw its chair, Diane Abbott MP, walk out at the beginning of November after just two weeks in charge. AFA’s approach has been heavily criticised by other anti-racist organisations and targeted by the police, but some credit it with disrupting the BNP’s ability to operate and organise.

Occasionally AFA’s activities reach a nationwide audience, as at Waterloo in September 1992, when it prevented hundreds of skinheads from attending a gig by neo-Nazi band Skrewdriver, and in the process closed down the station. But more often than not its work goes unreported and any credit is often claimed by the ANL.

AFA sees itself as offering an alternative to the type of people who might consider joining the BNP, which sets them apart from other anti-racist groups, and in so doing has attracted great criticism from many of them. Some of the other anti-racist groups would like to see them disband. But this is unlikely. With Derek Beackon planning to stand in a byelection in the Lansbury ward in Tower Hamlets next month, it seems that Anti-Fascist Action is certain to be around for a while yet.