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# A Bulwark Diminished?

## The Communist Party, the SWP and anti-fascism in the 1970s

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The last few years have seen much discussion of Britain's anti-fascist and anti-racist history, with the seventieth anniversary of the 'Battle of Cable Street' in October 2006, then the thirtieth anniversary of the launching of Rock Against Racism (RAR), the 'Battle of Lewisham' and the founding of the Anti-Nazi League (ANL) in 2007 and 2008 respectively. The 'Battle of Cable Street', when over 100,000 people blockaded the East End of London to prevent a march by Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists (BUF), has become an important part of the history of the British left, in particular the now defunct Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), and for Britain's Jewish communities. Many historical and cultural works have been devoted to 'Cable Street' over the years, with the most recent being the republication of Phil Piratin's 1948 account, *Our Flag Stays Red*, including a new introduction by the Marx Memorial Library's John Callow.<sup>1</sup> More widely discussed nowadays is the defeat of the National Front (NF) and the contribution of the Anti-Nazi League, alongside its sister project, Rock Against Racism, to the Front's demise in the late 1970s. As well as a recent monograph on the history of the ANL by David Renton, the 'Battle of Lewisham' and RAR have been rediscovered and re-evaluated by many on the left.<sup>2</sup> Just as anti-fascists looked to the 'Battle of Cable Street' and the anti-fascist activism of the CPGB in the 1930s as a historical precedent, anti-fascist campaigners are looking to the SWP and the ANL's actions in the 1970s for inspiration in fighting the British National Party today. One example of this is Love Music, Hate Racism as the current embodiment of Rock Against Racism, (the slogan originally came from an RAR poster). Most of this historical revisiting has focused on the role of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in the anti-fascist struggle and the ways it became the inheritor of the CPGB's anti-fascist legacy. The CPGB was in a period of decline by the late 1970s and its role in the anti-fascist movement had correspondingly diminished. As James Eaden and David Renton had written, '[t]he Communist Party

largely missed the boat on mass anti-racist campaigning in the 1970s', with the ANL/RAR 'mobilising a new generation of young radicals into political activity in a setting where the British Communist Party was notably absent'.<sup>3</sup> While the SWP has consistently critiqued the CPGB's anti-fascist actions of the 1970s, comparing their direct action with the moderate position of the Communist Party, little else has been written on the CPGB's campaigning against the NF. What this article will attempt is to redress this ignored part of Britain's anti-fascist history, which has been relatively marginalised in recent discussion of the defeat of the National Front.

The CPGB was able to organise anti-fascist action quite effectively, utilising local community politics, where the violence and intimidation of the NF was an immediate threat. However, as membership of the CPGB declined, its ability to organise anti-racist activity on a large scale decreased. By the late 1970s the momentum of the movement had swung behind the SWP and more importantly, the Anti-Nazi League. Whilst the political strategy of the Communist Party had made the party leadership critical of the SWP's militant approach, they were much more willing to support the Anti-Nazi League, although they were unable to influence its direction.

### **The legacy of 'Cable Street'**

The anti-fascist work of the CPGB between 1934 and 1939 was one of the Party's highest achievements. For the Communist Party, it was a demonstration of the popular front in action, when a party that had only 11,500 members in October 1936 could mobilise 100,000 people in mass anti-fascist action.<sup>4</sup> The narrative of the 'Battle of Cable Street' is largely based on Phil Piratin's *Our Flag Stays Red*, first published in 1948, while he was a Communist MP for Mile End and is recognised for creating the 'most lasting legacy of Communist mythology of the "Battle of Cable Street"'.<sup>5</sup> Piratin used the Communist Party's anti-fascist legacy in his 1945 electoral campaign, marking the 'peak of the triumphalist use of the iBattleî for party political purposes'.<sup>6</sup> The book was republished in 1978 to reinforce the legacy of the CPGB's anti-fascist traditions, at a time when the party was being surpassed by the SWP and the ANL. Piratin tried to minimise the connection between the 'Battle of Cable Street' and the actions of the SWP, claiming that their 'interpretations and conclusions on the anti-fascist struggle were distorted in order to bring them into line with the outlook of that party'.<sup>7</sup> In the traditional narrative of the 'Battle of Cable Street', reinforced by Piratin's account, the Communist Party was central to the anti-fascist actions against the BUF.

For the SWP in the 1970s, the ‘Battle of Cable Street’ was seen as the ‘decisive battle to smash the fascists...which has rightly passed into history as a crucial victory for the British working class’.<sup>8</sup> The SWP used the CPGB’s anti-fascist campaign of the 1930s in its justification for ‘direct action against the fascists, although the CPGB attempted to distance its history from the tactics used by the far left.’<sup>9</sup> In late August 1977, Dave Cook wrote in the *Morning Star*:

To equate the SWP’s tactics in Lewisham with what happened at Cable Street...is dangerous nonsense.

Mosley was stopped by the mobilisation of a quarter of a million Londoners brought into action as a result of a tremendous, sustained campaign by their mass organisations. A few militants didn’t suddenly make fiery speeches and, overnight, mass unity sprang into action.<sup>10</sup>

In the preface to the 1978 edition of *Our Flag Stays Red*, Piratin wrote that ‘trying to identify the current struggle against racism with the anti-fascist struggle of the 1930s’ was ‘a mistake’, which would ‘result in setbacks for the democratic movement’.<sup>11</sup>

The legacy of the CPGB’s involvement in the ‘Battle of Cable Street’ was important for the party’s post-war anti-fascist/anti-racist activism. But this legacy of militant anti-fascism was inconsistent with the Communist Party’s actions against the National Front in the 1970s. In the 1930s, the CPGB established itself as a monolithic and important organisation that was central within the anti-fascist movement. By the 1970s, the internal disarray inside the CPGB had led to varied support by party members to anti-fascism (and the Anti-Nazi League) and its role had been usurped by the Socialist Workers Party.

## **The rise of the National Front**

In February 1967, several small fascist and anti-immigration groups merged to form the National Front. The National Front was ‘an attempt to synthesize the mass politics and economic and political programme of the BUF with the ferocious anti-semitism and racial populism of Arnold Leese’, presented in a ‘more respectable and seemingly rational guise’.<sup>12</sup> Membership numbers were hard to determine throughout the existence of the NF, but it is estimated that it had around 1,500 members at its inception.<sup>13</sup>

It was Enoch Powell’s ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech in April 1968 that allowed the National Front to exploit popular racist attitudes as Powell ‘brought the

language and arguments of the neo-fascist political fringe into the heart of the establishment'.<sup>14</sup> Powell's speech gave the NF a massive boost, with it claiming 10,000 members in April 1968, although *Searchlight* editor, Gerry Gable estimated that it was probably around 7,000 'fully paid up' members.<sup>15</sup> However Powell was still seen as part of the Conservative establishment, which the NF tried to distance itself from. The NF agitated against the Conservative Government's acceptance of Ugandan Asians expelled by Idi Amin, despite the introduction of the 1971 Immigration Act. By criticising the 'soft' approach towards the Ugandan Asians by the Government, the NF appeared to many as an extreme extension of traditional Conservative ideals.

What characterised the NF during the period from 1968 to 1974 was its use of Conservative opposition to black immigration and its extreme position on traditional Conservative ideas. However when the economic crisis set in after 1974, the NF moved away from trying to appeal to middle-class Conservative voters to attempting to siphon Labour Party supporters and appealing to the working class, exploiting the dire economic situation by blaming black immigration for shortages in employment, housing and welfare. This period from 1974 until 1979 saw the NF's 'maximum electoral participation', but 'declining popular support', relying instead upon intimidation and violence towards immigrants, such as provocative marches through areas with large immigrant communities.<sup>16</sup> However by this time, opposition to the NF had grown dramatically, eventually culminating in the formation of the Anti-Nazi League and the 1979 electoral defeat of the National Front.

### **The 'no platform' strategy**

In the early 1970s, the National Front was increasing its electoral participation, attempting to appropriate middle-class support away from the 'soft' Conservative Government, playing down its notorious neo-Nazi elements. As the NF grew after the Ugandan Asians controversy and contested more seats in elections leading up to the 1974 General Elections, the anti-fascist movement developed the 'no platform' strategy to deny the NF venues to hold meetings or public addresses. Essentially 'no platform' was an extension of the successful anti-fascist strategy that had been developed since the late 1940s. As well as physically combating fascist agitation in the streets, one of the major strategies was campaigning for local governments and other institutions to prevent fascists from using public places to speak or meet.

Between 1972 and 1976, the 'no platform' concept dominated anti-fascist

strategy, supported by the Communist Party, the International Socialists and the International Marxist Group (IMG), as well as becoming policy for the National Union of Students (NUS), which was considerably influenced by the IMG and the CPGB. The 'no platform' strategy was not limited to petitioning local councils and institutions to deny the NF access to meeting places, but included physical opposition to the NF organising in public. As *The Red Mole* declared, 'the only way to deal with fascist type organisations like the National Front is to break up their activities *before* they grow to a size where they can begin to smash the activities of the working class'.<sup>17</sup> The 'no platform' strategy was about denying the NF venues to speak and was not interchangeable with the opposition on the streets, which occurred later with the SWP at places such as Lewisham. The street battles of the late 1970s were primarily the result of the NF switching tactics (after its failure to garner electoral support) to provocative demonstrations through areas with large immigrant communities, which some, particularly the SWP, thought should be physically opposed, in the tradition of the 'Battle of Cable Street'. 'No Platform' was essentially about the denial of access for the NF to public venues, either by petition or by physically preventing NF members from entering, where petitioning had failed.

The CPGB was, however, wary of the militancy of some on the far left who supported the 'no platform' position, with Cook warning that it was 'important that direct action does not become a substitute for the often more difficult task of winning the majority'.<sup>18</sup> 'Physical thuggery' was seen as counter-productive which created sympathy for those attacked and demonstrated 'the sort of bigotry and intolerance that alienates potential supporters'.<sup>19</sup> For the CPGB, the decision to deny fascists a platform should 'seek to involve the largest possible number of students' and not 'resort to individual terroristic acts'.<sup>20</sup>

The aim of the Communist Party was 'to unite the broadest forces possible against racialism', with the Political Committee believing that the application of the 'no platform' strategy was a tactical question for local bodies and 'whether one can argue for the total position is for each branch or body of comrades to decide in the concrete situation'.<sup>21</sup> There was a feeling amongst some Communist Party members that students and the far left were leading the anti-fascist movement, while the trade union movement was not active enough. 'I appreciate the role of the students in this struggle', wrote Frank Watters in *Comment*, 'But because we need the involvement of the labour movement any committees set up to organise this struggle must have the aim the winning of the organised working class'.<sup>22</sup> The younger activists, though radicalised and influenced by the far left, were felt to be

disassociated from the traditional labour movement and the anti-fascist bodies organised were described by Watters as “ad hoc” committees... set up... by a handful of people with little or no influence, in the labour movement’.<sup>23</sup> In a veiled attack on the far left, Watters claimed that these committees ‘expect the [labour] movement to respond to calls which are not designed to secure the fullest possible mobilisation of anti-fascist forces’ and ‘instead are geared towards “confrontation”’.<sup>24</sup>

On the other hand, the International Socialists criticised the CPGB, for ‘talking of “peaceful pickets” and implying that the police can “stop the fascists”’.<sup>25</sup> ‘For the left to call upon the police force to deal with the fascists’, asserted the journal *International Socialism*, ‘is to provide it with a chance to enhance its own powers for attacking the left’.<sup>26</sup> The ‘peaceful picket, pious resolutions, rational arguments alone’ would not stop the fascist threat as fascists ‘have to be driven physically from the streets’.<sup>27</sup> They argued that ‘only mass mobilisation on the streets can defeat fascism’, whilst internally accepting that ‘elections are the main demonstration of Front support’, which required different tactics than the street battles of the late 1970s.<sup>28</sup>

For the CPGB, the emphasis was on ‘unity and discipline’ amongst the broad sections of the labour and progressive movement that organised against the National Front. What concerned them was, as London District Secretary Gerry Cohen stated, ‘the defence by such a colossal demonstration of police power, of organisations and policies which are so abhorrent to the wishes of the great mass of ordinary, decent people’.<sup>29</sup> The issue of ‘no platform’ and direct action, the far left, the police and the NF first came to a head on 15 June, 1974, when an anti-fascist demonstration in Red Lion Square in London ended in the death of a demonstrator, Kevin Gately.

### **Red Lion Square and the death of Kevin Gately**

On June 15, 1974, the National Front had organised a march through London, ending at Conway Hall in Red Lion Square. Liberation (formerly the Movement for Colonial Freedom) organised a counter-demonstration that was to end with a meeting outside the hall, which was supported by the CPGB, the IS, the IMG and many other groups within the labour movement. However as Nigel Copey noted, ‘Unbeknown to Liberation... was the determination of the IMG to organise a mass picket at the main entrance of the hall thereby denying the NF access’.<sup>30</sup> The police attempted to disperse the IMG contingent that were blocking the NF’s access to Conway Hall. It was in this initial violent clash between police and militant anti-fascists, lasting for less than fifteen minutes, that Kevin Gately, a

student from Warwick University, was fatally injured. Gately died from a brain haemorrhage stemming from a blow to the head.<sup>31</sup>

The Communist Party had supported the counter-demonstration organised by the London Area Council of Liberation. The Liberation/MCF Area Council had been staffed by several CPGB members, including Kay Beauchamp, Tony Gilbert, Dorothy Kuya, George Pefkos and Billy Strachan.<sup>32</sup> The march by the NF was in violation of the Race Relations Act, the CPGB claimed and on these grounds, the march should have been banned. Appealing to the repressive apparatus of the state, such as the police, to deal with fascists, plus criticism of the police showed an inconsistency in the Communist Party's strategy, which believed the state could be utilised to counter the NF, while the police were hostile to the left and far from impartial. Gerry Cohen wrote in the *Morning Star*, 'The police, like the National Front, are on the side of the exploiting class. They operated on that side with thoroughness and with fury on Saturday in Red Lion Square. And Kevin Gately died'. The CPGB and Liberation emphasised the peaceful nature of their march, quoting Gilbert as saying, 'At least 99.9 per cent of the 2,000 people there were absolutely peaceful and they were attacked'.<sup>33</sup>

The IMG were condemned by the CPGB for aiming at confrontation. The IMG 'played into the hands of all those in the key positions of establishment...aimed at destroying our basic democratic rights'.<sup>34</sup> A press release by the CPGB stated that, 'At no time did our Party contemplate, nor did it take part in any discussions that contemplated of bringing about any physical confrontation with the police or anybody else at this demonstration'.<sup>35</sup> According to the party, there was 'absolutely no reason why the police could not have contained the situation *peacefully at all times*' and the police had 'undoubtedly mishandled the situation'.<sup>36</sup> For Cohen, this was the lesson of the Red Lion Square demonstrations: 'For the sake of the humanity don't let the adventurist tactics of a minority, and the way they are seized on by the media, divert from the main question...Root out this evil'.<sup>37</sup>

Lord Scarman had been placed in charge of the inquiry and a report was eventually produced in February 1975. Scarman's conclusions strongly defended the police force's actions and criticised the demonstrators, primarily the IMG and the naivety of Liberation, for the violence. The report was 'unable to make any definite finding as to the specific cause of the fatal injury which Mr Kevin Gately suffered'.<sup>38</sup> Scarman largely absolved the police of any wrongdoing. As Scarman could not discover the direct cause of Gately's death, in his judgement he found that 'those who started the riot carry a measure of moral responsibility for his death' namely the IMG, who he believed had 'initiated the disorder by their inexcusable assault on the police

cordon'.<sup>39</sup> The overall lesson that Lord Scarman had for the anti-fascist movement was 'co-operate with the police'.<sup>40</sup> However the relationship between the anti-fascist left and the police only grew further apart.

After Red Lion Square, Liberation's role as a national body that could organise an anti-fascist response to the NF diminished, even though the anti-fascist movement was increasing in size. One of the prominent reasons why Liberation could not continue as an effective vehicle for anti-fascist action was that it was essentially an anti-imperialist pressure group, which focused upon international issues and relied of building international alliances, not locally based anti-fascist groupings. The objectives of Liberation were aimed towards the 'abolition of imperialism and neo-colonialism', which attracted different activists who were not involved in domestic anti-fascist work.<sup>41</sup> In the IMG's *Red Weekly*, the Group described Liberation as a 'CP dominated organisation', which now had 'refused to put out any public call for a counter-demonstration', leaving 'all the initiatives in the hands of the NF and the police'.<sup>42</sup> In mid-1975, the IMG had noted that there was a void 'in terms of a national anti-fascist focus' left by Liberation and the Communist Party, partly filled by the relaunch of the anti-fascist journal, *Searchlight* earlier that year.<sup>43</sup> By early 1977, the CPGB's National Student Committee had removed 'no platform' as a slogan and acknowledged that the 'real debate on racialism had been lost in this controversy over "No Platform"'.<sup>44</sup>

### **The fading influence of the CPGB**

The NF's fortunes had shrunk throughout the mid-1970s as the anti-fascist response continued to grow. In 1976, the National Front were still contesting elections and actually increased the number of seats they contested but by 1977 this electoral push had come to the same result as that as in 1974—notoriety but no tangible gains. The main focus of the NF was now on occupying the streets with provocative street marches and confrontation with a growing anti-fascist movement. At the same time, the NF's campaign of intimidation saw an increase in violence against Britain's black population, with several deaths and 'scores of other similar incidents of unprovoked and savage racist attacks'.<sup>45</sup> In this atmosphere of confrontation and opposing the NF on the streets, the CPGB were marginalised as the momentum of the anti-fascist movement was taken up by the IS/SWP.

In the immediate steps to combat the NF, the CPGB called for 'a ban on all racist activity and strengthen the Race Relations Act against incitement to race hatred' and to 'develop the broadest united campaign of all

anti-racist forces to resist racist activities'.<sup>46</sup> However the CPGB's Political Committee believed that there was still no 'basis for forming some new, national anti-racist organisation' and the party 'should not try to form at this stage a national organisation...which presents the danger of being a grouping of Left wing organisations and another area of disruptive activity for ultra-Lefts'.<sup>47</sup> By the end of 1976, the SWP were becoming the primary organisation on the left in the anti-fascist movement.

Although it was the most prominent organisation to the left of the Communist Party, the SWP was still much smaller than the CPGB, with membership peaking at just over 4,000 in the late 1970s, compared to the CPGB's 25,293 in 1977 and 20,599 in 1979.<sup>48</sup> By 1976, the SWP's concerns now focused on the Right to Work campaign and combating the NF, announcing that 'the twin themes of fighting racialism and fighting for the right to work now dominate our immediate perspective'.<sup>49</sup>

The IS/SWP saw the NF's marches as part of a fascist attempt to control the streets and build a mass organisation, so 'organised fascism had to be confronted physically'.<sup>50</sup> The SWP criticised the CPGB for '[m]erely shouting "One race—the human race"' as those attracted to the NF were 'fed up with rhetoric from politicians, they are impressed by action'.<sup>51</sup> To prevent the building of a fascist mass movement required a strategy of 'uncompromising opposition to any form of publicity, meeting or demonstration' for the NF, which meant physically confronting the NF in the streets.<sup>52</sup> As the SWP stepped up their anti-fascist strategy of confronting the NF in the streets, they warned, 'physical action will become the litmus test for distinguishing those who are seriously attempting to build a revolutionary alternative from those who are merely careerists and hacks'.<sup>53</sup> By August 1977, this 'litmus test' had come with the major street battle of the 1970s between the NF and the anti-fascist left, the 'Battle of Lewisham'.

### **The 'Battle of Lewisham'**

The 'Battle of Lewisham' on 13 August 1977, when anti-fascist demonstrators clashed with the National Front and the police in the London borough of Lewisham was a turning point for both the CPGB and the SWP in the anti-fascist movement. The anti-fascist movement in Lewisham called for a ban from Home Secretary Merlyn Rees and Metropolitan Police Commissioner David McNee under the 1936 Public Order Act. However Commissioner McNee stated that 'he was turning down calls to ban the NF march because to do so would be to give in to "mob rule"'.<sup>54</sup>

With the refusal to ban the NF march, the Lewisham CPGB branch

announced that 'ALCARAF [the All Lewisham Campaign Against Racism and Fascism] should encourage all Borough organisations...to support a counter-demonstration...calling for a peaceful, democratic, multiracial society based on social harmony', as well as, 'to reject fascism and end unemployment'.<sup>55</sup> ALCARAF and the CPGB urged a 'powerful but peaceful demonstration', which was scheduled to take place at a different time, away from the location of the NF's march at Clifton Rise.<sup>56</sup> The SWP, on the other hand, announced its own demonstration at Clifton Rise, where the NF was meeting, with the notion of confronting the NF. The SWP recognised the ALCARAF march, but declared that 'it will provide no substitute for confronting the fascists directly'.<sup>57</sup> The *Morning Star* announced that, 'it almost goes without saying that the Socialist Workers Party has prepared itself for the definitive game of cowboys and indians'.<sup>58</sup>

On the day of the demonstration, around 4,000 people attended the ALCARAF march.<sup>59</sup> In the flyer handed out to marchers, the CPGB called for marchers not to attend the SWP demonstration, appealing for them to resist 'violent confrontation with the National Front or the police' and remain 'united and disciplined', asserting that organisations, such as the SWP, 'who insist on the ritual enactment of vanguardist violence only damage the hard, patient work that has been put in over the years in the area by anti-racists and anti-fascists'.<sup>60</sup> The SWP distributed its own leaflet amongst the ALCARAF march to join the demonstration at Clifton Rise. Around 3,000–5,000 demonstrators congregated at this point, compared with 500–600 NF marches and 'as police made snatch raids into the crowd...counter-demonstrators retaliated with bottles, bricks, and soft drink cans'.<sup>61</sup> Fighting also broke out between police and counter-demonstrators on Lewisham High Street at the end of the NF march. By the end of the day, 110 people had been injured, including 56 policemen and 210 people detained, with 204 charged with offences.<sup>62</sup>

The following week's *Socialist Worker's* headline declared 'We Stopped The Nazis...And We'll Do It Again!'<sup>63</sup> The SWP saw the 'Battle of Lewisham' as a major victory, when the 'Nazi Front got the hammering of their lives'.<sup>64</sup> The black SWP paper, *Flame* called Lewisham 'the day that the Black youth gave the police a beating' and declared, 'For the black community it was a day of victory'.<sup>65</sup> The *Socialist Worker* reported that the 'angriest anti-fascists were not those who had travelled many miles to take on the Nazis, but the local people, the blacks especially'.<sup>66</sup> The paper quoted a local resident as saying, 'I don't agree with everything the Socialist Workers' Party says but they were the only organisation to stand up for the rights of black people here'.<sup>67</sup>

For the Communist Party, the ‘Battle of Lewisham’ demonstrated the need for widespread political pressure to ensure that the Public Order Act and the Race Relations Act were used effectively to ban provocative racist marches and in the case of this ban not being implemented, the need for a broad-based counter-demonstration, rather than street fighting. The CPGB condemned the ‘crass adventurism’ of the SWP to assemble where the NF were marching.<sup>68</sup> While Dave Cook acknowledged the ‘courage and determination’ of those who took part in the protest at Clifton Rise, the ensuing clashes ‘gave the capitalist press the chance to present that day as being a violent struggle between two sets of “extremists”’.<sup>69</sup> What was needed for a successful anti-racist campaign was a broad-based movement including the labour and progressive movements, as well as the black communities, which had the potential to be isolated by the violent clashes of the SWP. As Dave Cook wrote, ‘The problem about street fighting is that only street-fighters are likely to apply, and it is this which can make it difficult to achieve the mobilisation of the labour movement’.<sup>70</sup> Some members within the CPGB, particularly those involved in the militant anti-fascism of the 1930s and 1940s, defended the confrontational tactics used against the NF, but this was more likely to be support for the local black community, than for their Trotskyist rivals. Tony Gilbert, one of the CPGB’s leading anti-racist activists and a former International Brigades volunteer, ‘commented on the courage of the young blacks’ after Lewisham at a National Race Relations Committee (NRRC) meeting, but stated that the main lesson of Lewisham was that ‘the presence of the Party must always be visible on any anti-fascist demo’.<sup>71</sup>

For the CPGB, the ‘Battle of Lewisham’ signalled the end of a ‘primarily *defensive* phase’ against the NF, where ‘mobilisation reflected the intentions of the fascists’.<sup>72</sup> The need was not the ‘occasional dramatic “confrontation”’ with the NF, but a ‘detailed, systematic, painstaking’ campaign to ‘promote propaganda and education...to show the benefits of living in a peaceful multiracial society’.<sup>73</sup> For the SWP, Lewisham showed that it was clear that ‘many people outside the SWP were keen to oppose the National Front but wanted little to do with the SWP itself’.<sup>74</sup> This realisation led to the formation of the Anti-Nazi League.

### **‘The National Front is a nazi front’ The Anti-Nazi League**

In November 1977, the Anti-Nazi League was launched at the House of Commons by SWP District Organiser Paul Holborrow, alongside two Labour left MPs, Peter Hain and Ernie Roberts. The purpose of the Anti-

Nazi League was to counter the organisation and propaganda of the NF as the prospect of a General Election loomed closer. The ANL's founding statement stated the League's objectives 'to organise on the widest possible scale against the propaganda and activities of the Nazis in Britain'. The urgent need 'to alert the people...to the growing menace by the New Nazis' meant that the ANL was narrowly focused in its purpose, reflected in the name of the organisation. The ANL acknowledged that the immediate threat was the 'worrying prospect of a Nazi party gaining significant support in Britain' as the NF intended to put forward over 300 candidates at the next General Election. They also acknowledged that the National Front used popular racism and dissatisfaction over unemployment, housing and cuts in social and welfare services to garner support for their fascist aims stating that, 'Ordinary voters must be made aware of the threat that lies behind the National Front'.<sup>75</sup> Thus, according to SWP leader Tony Cliff, the target of the ANL was 'the hard racism of the NF which, if allowed to thrive, could convert the many more numerous soft racists in British society into the caches of a mass fascist movement'.<sup>76</sup>

The relationship between the Anti-Nazi League and the Communist Party was difficult at first, with a long tradition of mistrust between the CPGB and the Socialist Workers Party. In the aftermath of the 'Battle of Lewisham', *Socialist Worker* criticised the leadership of the CPGB for its 'refusal to join the united demonstration' at Clifton Rise.<sup>77</sup> The SWP claimed that 'many individual members [of the CPGB] were with us, remembering Cable Street in the 1930s' and announced, 'We ask those members of the Communist Party who disagree with the suicidal line of the leaders to demand its immediate change'.<sup>78</sup> Although not making any public statements about the ANL at first, the CPGB leadership were wary of the League and its narrow focus, favouring broader based anti-racist organisations and also were sceptical of the influence and direction of the SWP. The reporting of the foundation of the Anti-Nazi League in the *Morning Star* announced that the ANL was a 'broad-based campaign...supported by over a hundred public figures, including 40 Labour MPs', not mentioning the SWP at all.<sup>79</sup>

In early 1978, the *Morning Star* began to present the ANL favourably, while Dave Cook acknowledged the 'valuable job' the ANL were doing in emphasising the Nazi origins of the NF.<sup>80</sup> In April 1978, the Political Committee of the CPGB announced that it supported the ANL as a 'propaganda and campaigning organisation *against the National Front*', but reiterated that the ANL was not 'an appropriate body to carry out the detailed systematic work against racism...for which *broad anti-racist committees* are the most appropriate'.<sup>81</sup> In *International Socialism*, Chanie Rosenburg

claimed that the CPGB joined the ANL (incorrectly dating it after the RAR/ANL Carnival on 30 April, 1978) because it was ‘waning and afraid of being totally outflanked’.<sup>82</sup> This was the view of the SWP in 1978 when it asserted that the ANL Carnival confirmed ‘the fact that the CP despite having about three times as many active members as we do, is not playing a leading role in the growing anti-racist movement’.<sup>83</sup> The ‘tiny CP presence’ at the Carnival was considered by the SWP ‘a major disaster for them’ and highlighted the wider crisis within the Communist Party.<sup>84</sup> Geoff Brown, an ANL organiser in Manchester, has argued that the reason the CPGB joined was ‘because large chunks of the Labour left and trade union bureaucracy had already decided to support the ANL’ and with the Party’s traditional allies enlisted, ‘To stay out would mean the CP risking political isolation’.<sup>85</sup> Thus, Bill Dunn, the CPGB’s London District Industrial Organiser, joined the Anti-Nazi League Steering Committee in spring 1978.<sup>86</sup>

The ANL began its campaign with a distribution of anti-NF propaganda in Bournemouth East during a NF-contested by-election in late 1977.<sup>87</sup> From this point until the General Election in May 1979, the Anti-Nazi League enjoyed immense success as a mass movement against the NF. The focus of the ANL was ‘to erode popular support for the National Front’, which it did though combining ‘mass propaganda...with militant action on the streets’.<sup>88</sup> Focusing on the electoral hopes of the NF to present themselves as a respectable party, the ANL publicised the Nazi elements of the NF, with slogans such as ‘Stop the Nazi National Front’ and ‘Don’t be taken for a ride—the National Front is Nazi’.<sup>89</sup> This involved a massive dissemination anti-NF propaganda, with 5,250,000 leaflets and a million badges and stickers distributed during the first year of the ANL’s existence.<sup>90</sup>

Although the SWP did have a significant presence within the ANL, it was the simplicity of the ANL’s message of opposing the NF Nazis, easily identifiable and objected to by most, that helped the ANL succeed in destroying popular support for the NF. The structure of the ANL was a contentious issue from time to time and some felt that it needed some formalised direction, which then had the potential to alienate other supporters. The Communist Party also had reservations about the structure and organisation of the Anti-Nazi League. The CPGB supported the ANL as a ‘propaganda and campaigning organisation *against the National Front*’.<sup>91</sup> A 1978 NRRC pamphlet noted that the ANL was ‘primarily an action organisation’ and its structure ‘lends itself to fast impressive mobilisation’ acknowledging that at this task ‘the ANL has shown itself first-class’.<sup>92</sup>

Writing in *Marxism Today* in July 1978, Gideon Ben-Tovim noted that the most ‘imaginative and contemporary approach to anti-fascist struggle’

was the ANL, ‘in which the “old left”—Tribune MPs, the Communist Party and the trade union movement—have not been major forces’.<sup>93</sup> The Anti-Nazi League was praised by the CPGB for its similarities to the party’s own broad democratic alliance, the Popular Front strategy for the 1970s, despite protests from the SWP, who having long opposed the concept of the Popular Front, denied that the ANL was such a Front. For the Communist Party, the ANL reflected the broad democratic alliance espoused by *The British Road to Socialism* and therefore, the party believed it could act as a ‘major, though by no means, unifying force’, due to its ‘heterogeneous membership, its contacts and roots’.<sup>94</sup>

### **23 April, 1979, Southall: The death of Blair Peach**

In the final days of the NF’s election campaign, it decided to hold a meeting at Southall Town Hall on 23 April, 1979. The reaction by the left and the local black community led to a major police operation, with the result being hundreds of injuries and the death of one anti-fascist protestor. To oppose the National Front’s meeting at Southall Town Hall, a community meeting, called by the Southall IWA, decided on a course of action to petition the council to refuse the NF access to the Town Hall, march from Southall to Ealing Town Hall on 22 April and that ‘all businesses, restaurants, shops, etc. should shut down on 23 April from 1 pm onwards’.<sup>95</sup> The SWP and the ANL had called for a protest march on 23 April, but had been ‘turned down by local groupings in favour of the sit-down protest’.<sup>96</sup>

Although the NF meeting was to begin at 7.30pm, confrontations between police and youth had occurred throughout the early afternoon. With over 2,700 police involved, around 2,000 demonstrators were confronted by the police and the Special Patrol Group (SPG), which began to prevent demonstrators from protesting out the front of the Town Hall.<sup>97</sup> David Renton has written that, ‘Between 7.30 and 9 pm, Southall witnessed a full-scale police riot’.<sup>98</sup> The SWP pamphlet, *Southall: The Fight For Our Future*, described the events:

The first lines of foot police opened up and made way for SPG men with riot shields and hoards of baton-wielding police on horseback. Some demonstrators tried to defend themselves by throwing bricks. But it was useless. The mounties ran amock, joking, laughing and making racist remarks as they smashed skulls with their batons. The footmen followed up using riot shields as weapons and arresting anyone...The police violence did nothing to control the situation.<sup>99</sup>

At around 7.45pm, Blair Peach, an ANL and SWP member, was 'struck on the head by an assailant widely believed to have been a member of the SPG', dying of his injuries after midnight.<sup>100</sup> By the end of the night, 342 people, 'mostly Asian and local', had been arrested.<sup>101</sup>

The following day's *Morning Star*, having gone to press before Blair Peach's death was announced, reported the 'total shutdown' of Southall.<sup>102</sup> The next day's *Morning Star* contained the headline, 'Curb The Mad Dogs Of Racism!', declaring that 'Rees, McNee and Thatcher—All to Blame in Southall Tragedy'. Home Secretary Merlyn Rees was accused of allowing the NF 'to spread its racist poison in clear violation of the Race Relations Act'. Metropolitan Police Commissioner David McNee was also accused of 'protecting a handful of racist hoodlums', when it was McNee's 'duty to protect the freedom of the citizens of Southall', but he had failed to do so and, 'On the contrary, his men assaulted them, left, right and centre'. The CPGB reiterated its line that 'throwing missiles at the police is not the way to fight racism', but understood 'the sense of frustration, anger and outrage' felt by the black community in Southall. Whatever violent action was taken by the protestors on 23 April, the *Morning Star* stated that the 'real violence in Southall was the officially sponsored violence from mobs of police, apparently including the notorious Special Patrol Group, who simply went beserk [sic]'. The death of Blair Peach and the violent clashes in Southall were 'the direct result of the toleration of the National Front provocations by the authorities', declared CPGB General Secretary Gordon McLennan.<sup>103</sup>

Approximately 15,000 people marched through Southall on 28 April, 1979 in memory of Blair Peach.<sup>104</sup> An official inquest, like that held after Red Lion Square, was never held, but the NCCL held an unofficial inquest and Scotland Yard's Complaints Investigation Bureau also conducted a report. *The Leveller* reported in January 1980 that this report implied that 'prime suspicion for Peach's murder was narrowed down to six police officers'.<sup>105</sup> No one has ever been indicted for his murder.

In the May General Election, the National Front received only 1.3 per cent of the vote out of the 303 electorates challenged.<sup>106</sup> Margaret Thatcher won the election convincingly and ushered in eighteen years of Conservative rule. Alongside the important anti-fascist work done by the Anti-Nazi League, one of the other primary reasons for the demise of the NF at the General Election was appeal of Thatcher's right-wing populism to potential NF voters. The NF split into three different factions, while the openly neo-Nazi British Movement continued, recruiting heavily amongst the young skinheads left unemployed by Thatcher's economic policies.

For the CPGB on the other hand, Thatcher's election contributed to the reassessment of class politics that had already begun with *The British Road to Socialism* in 1977.

### **Was the Anti-Nazi League a success?**

In the lead up to the 1979 General Election, the Anti-Nazi League were very successful in their aim of disseminating anti-NF propaganda and highlighting the 'Nazi' elements of the National Front. The 1978 local government elections saw the National Front's vote fall significantly, before the Front's dismal result in May 1979.<sup>107</sup> However Maurice Ludmer warned in *Searchlight*, 'The Front has suffered a major blow, but the racism on which it breeds is alive and well and living in Conservative Central Office'.<sup>108</sup> The explicit fascism of the National Front had been curtailed, but racism was still a widespread phenomenon in British society. After the Conservatives' victory, Britain's black communities still faced many problems—harassment by the police, much higher unemployment rates under the monetarist policies of the Conservatives, continuing racial discrimination in the workplace, housing and social services and restrictions on citizenship under the 1981 British Nationality Act.

A constant criticism of the Anti-Nazi League was the ANL's emphasis upon the explicit Nazism of the NF, rather than campaigning against all forms of racism. Paul Gilroy has argued that the League limited the anti-racism (and anti-capitalism) of Rock Against Racism to an emphasis on the 'Nazi character of neo-fascist and racist politics [at] the exclusion of every other consideration',<sup>109</sup> which hindered campaigning against other forms of popular and institutional racism. Alana Lentin has described the focus on Nazism and neo-Nazism by the ANL as a 'teleological view of racism which identifies Hitlerism as the specific form of racism to which British extremists aspire'.<sup>110</sup> These arguments seem to suggest that the ANL worked in a vacuum by itself, not in co-existence with other anti-racist organisations. But as David Renton has noted, 'For many black and Asian people living in Britain, the ANL stood as a key part of a bigger movement against racism'.<sup>111</sup>

The objective of the ANL, as declared in the League's founding statement, was 'to organise on the widest possible scale against the propaganda and activities of the Nazis in Britain', a discernable and immediate threat as the NF stepped up its highly confrontational public appearances in the late 1970s.<sup>112</sup> The structure of the ANL meant that it could mobilise a large number of people, many belonging to different (and conflicting) organisa-

tions, around single issue and was recognised by most of the organisations involved that the immediacy of the ANL should not replace broad-based anti-racist campaigning against other forms of racism in British society.

The emphasis upon electoral politics and countering the NF's election hopes meant that the success of the ANL was temporary, although the League continued to campaign and hold events until July 1981, with the last RAR Carnival coinciding with the riots across the inner cities of Britain. A sustained campaign against the institutional racism witnessed under Thatcher's Conservative Government required a different form of organisation, rather than the ad-hoc and top-down leadership of the ANL that was geared towards quick mobilisation. Any attempt to broaden the anti-racist agenda of the ANL, such as campaigning against immigration controls, had to be weighed against the likelihood that this would narrow the willingness of different people to be involved in the League's activities. As Dave Cook wrote in the *Morning Star* in October 1978:

The Anti-Nazi League is a not a political party, nor is it a directing centre for the anti-racist forces, which gave other powerful components.

It is a movement, not an organisation with a formal structure and centralised control. It is important that it remains so.<sup>113</sup>

The electoral defeat of the NF in 1979 did not mean that racism, or even neo-Nazism, had been vanquished. At the CPGB's National Congress in December 1981, the party acknowledged the 'defeats suffered by the National Front, as a result of the mass activity of the Anti-Nazi League and the general anti-fascist movement', but recognised that this had been at the expense of other anti-racist actions, highlighting the 'failure of the left movement to tackle racist ideology wherever it is expressed, at the workplace, in pubs, clubs, etc.'<sup>114</sup> The fact that racism continued to raise its ugly head throughout the 1980s under Thatcher (most demonstrably through the inner-city riots in 1980, 1981 and 1985) does not diminish the impact the Anti-Nazi League had upon the explicit hard-line racism of the far right. Throughout the 1980s, the National Front and the other fascist groupings floundered and fought amongst each other, with NF membership falling from a possible 10,000 in early 1979 to just under 1,000 by January 1985.<sup>115</sup> While it is important to understand the limits of the Anti-Nazi League's anti-fascist campaign of the late 1970s, it is perhaps equally important to contemplate what may have occurred if there was no campaign by the League at all.

## Conclusion

During the 1970s, one of the most immediate threats in the struggle against racism was the rise of the fascist National Front. The CPGB had a tradition of anti-fascist activism, going back to the 1930s, and despite the party's declining membership and stature, anti-fascism was one area of the struggle where it had the most potential for success. The party's anti-fascist strategy was more focused on the building of broad alliances, based on community, progressive and immigrant organisations, emphasising a wide campaign against racial discrimination and race hatred. This was an extension of attempts by the Communist Party to forge links on widely common issues with others for broad left alliances, as put forward in *The British Road to Socialism*. Incorporated into this strategy was a dependency upon the state to combat the racist agitation and violence of the NF, with the party continually calling for the authorities to counter racist propaganda and discrimination. Despite its legacy of militant anti-fascism, the Communist Party was reluctant to endorse militant actions against the NF, maintaining that peaceful demonstrations, and not clashes with police or fascist groups, would encourage more people to be involved in anti-racist activities. In contrast to this position was the SWP, who the CPGB saw as an 'adventurist' Trotskyist organisation, and their emphasis on physically confronting the fascists and 'controlling the streets'. By the time the SWP had gained the momentum of the anti-fascist movement with the formation of the Anti-Nazi League in late 1977, the Communist Party's role in the movement had significantly declined and sections of the party membership were apprehensive towards working with their Trotskyist rivals. But the CPGB leadership embraced the popular politics of the ANL, viewing the League as a narrowly focused adaptation of the CPGB's broad democratic alliance. The ANL was successful in eroding popular support for the National Front at the 1979 General Election, but this was replaced with the much greater problem of Thatcherism, which exacerbated the already existing divides in the Communist Party.

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