

soundings issue 14 Spring 2000

Anti-Fascist Action

*Radical resistance or
rent-a-mob?*

Mark Hayes and Paul Aylward

Mark Hayes and Paul Aylward analyse the nature
of *Anti-Fascist Action*.

There appears to be a general consensus amongst political commentators that there is a re-emerging fascist threat in contemporary Europe. As Roger Eatwell has noted,

waves of extreme and radical right-wing activity have been washing up over European shores during the half-century since the total military defeat of Fascism. Yet, until recently, the long-term electoral prospects of such parties have appeared minimal ... but as the new millennium beckons, the latest western European wave appears to be the most threatening one for fifty years.¹

The re-emergence of the fascist spectre has been graphically reflected in the political prominence of Le Pen's *Front National* in France, and in the success of Jorg Haider and the Freedom Party in Austria. Moreover, with unemployment

1. R. Eatwell, 'The Dynamics of Right-Wing Electoral Breakthrough', *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol 32 No 3, July 1998, p3.

Soundings

in Europe standing at over 30 million, and economic crisis threatening to undermine political stability across the region, there is growing concern that fascist ideas will once again begin to resonate. As Chantal Mouffe has pointed out, the resurgence of the extreme right should be seen in the context of a 'bland homogenised political world', where 'the left' has, in essence, capitulated to neo-liberal hegemony, and where ideological convergence allows the more extreme populist parties on the right to portray themselves as the 'radical' alternative to the dominant consensus'.² With the left out-manoeuvred in ideological terms, and in the absence of genuine political choice, it is not difficult to envisage widespread disaffection in society, and this might well provide practical political opportunities for the far right.

However, whilst we acknowledge the dangers inherent in the contemporary situation, the fact is that fascist organisations in Britain have, as yet, singularly failed to make any significant political or electoral impact. There have been various explanations for this, some more plausible than others.' For instance, there has sometimes been an assumption (albeit implicit in some cases) that the indigenous population has been, or is, characterised by the extent to which it has imbued 'liberal' values. So from this perspective the primary reason for fascism's failure to take root has been/is the pervasive tolerance and forbearance of the British population. This approach, although comforting, is clearly inadequate, and other factors have undoubtedly had a more significant effect. For instance, it is undoubtedly the case that Britain has not experienced the kind of severe economic and social crisis which might have precipitated widespread discontent with liberal democratic forms and structures. Socio-economic dislocation in Britain has been regionalised and sporadic. It is also evident that the fascist groups themselves have been persistently undermined in their efforts by their own political and organisational

2. See C. Mouffe, 'The Radical Centre: A Politics Without Adversary', *Soundings*, Issue No 9 Summer 1998. There are many useful accounts of fascism and fascist ideology; see, for example, R. Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, Routledge 1993; M. Kitchen, *Fascism*, Macmillan 1976; R. Eatwell, *Fascism: A History*, Chatto and Windus 1995; and W. Laqueur (ed), *Fascism: A Reader's Guide*, Pelican 1982.
3. See M. Cronin (ed), *The Failure of British Fascism*, Macmillan 1996; and R. Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, I. B. Tauris 1998; and R. Thurlow, 'The Failure of British Fascism' in A. Thorpe (ed), *The Failure of Political Extremism in Inter-War Britain*, University of Exeter 1989.

ineptitude. Moreover, the existence of a conventional constitutional right-wing Conservative Party has inevitably undermined support for potential populist alternatives; and the absence of any credible left-wing (Communist) threat has meant that fascists have not been able to exploit the fear that this might have generated. In any case, the mechanics of the electoral system in Britain tend to make it extremely difficult for smaller parties to make a significant impact. In addition to all of this, the fascist groups have never been able (or indeed in some cases willing) to overcome the negative historical legacy of the second world war and, more specifically, the Holocaust. Naturally, this experience has been enough to convince most rational people that fascism (particularly the Nazi version) was a grotesque and irredeemable political creed.

So, for a variety of inter-related reasons (some of which are more plausible than others), fascism in Britain has never really prospered politically. Of course the fact that the British Union of Fascists, the National Front or the British National Party have failed to make significant political headway should not lead to complacency. It would be a mistake to accept uncritically the notion of British exceptionalism, and even whilst operating at the margins of politics such organisations have the capacity to inflict serious damage upon the social fabric.

Given the evident threat posed by the extreme right, fascist groups and parties have always inadvertently managed to precipitate the formation of anti-fascist organisations - groups specifically designed for the purpose of eradicating the fascist threat. In the contemporary context perhaps the most well known (and certainly the most vocal) of these groups has been the Anti-Nazi League. The ANL was founded in November 1977 in response to the perception that the NF had achieved a measure of electoral success, especially in London. In fact the NF's vote was largely the result of differential turnout in local elections, but the tactic of 'controlling the streets' in order to 'march and grow', which was articulated by the likes of Martin Webster (NF National Activities Organiser), was always likely to induce opposition. Although the nucleus of the ANL was provided by the Trotskyist Socialist Workers' Party, it was successful in attracting support from the wider labour and trade union movement. It was also able to achieve a prominent media profile through cultural activities such as 'Rock Against Racism'. In many respects therefore it could be argued that the ANL provided the paradigm for other similar groups which emerged subsequently, such as 'Youth Against Racism in Europe' and the

Soundings

Anti-Racist Alliance' (indeed the ANL itself was re-launched in 1992). However, there is one particular anti-fascist organisation that has sought to set itself apart and which, in terms of media exposure and academic analysis, has been significantly under-researched. This is Anti-Fascist Action'.

Anti-Fascist Action was originally set up in 1985 and attempted to differentiate itself from other similar groups by the extent to which it was willing to advocate the use of violence in pursuit of overriding objectives. This has led to criticism of AFA as, among other things, an organisation engaged in the 'politics of the punch up', 'macho posturing', 'squadism' and even 'terrorism'. Indeed the conventional perception was probably best expressed by Peter Paterson when he described AFA as 'a group which looks suspiciously like left-wing Fascists eager for a street war with right-wing Fascists' (Daily Mail 19.5.92). In fact extensive primary research recently conducted would tend to suggest that such criticisms tend to oversimplify a relatively sophisticated political phenomenon.⁴

AFA was formed principally by disgruntled members of the ANL, who coalesced around the 'no platform for Fascists' strategy. AFA activists felt that, given the BNP's tactical predisposition for street confrontations as a means of attracting white working-class support, a commitment to physical resistance was a prerequisite for effective anti-fascism. Fascists would thereby be confronted by a clear physical as well as ideological opposition. Underpinning this approach was a pervasive scepticism about the utility of purely legal methods, and a belief that an over-reliance on the state might well precipitate legislation which could be deployed against 'extremists' on the left as well as the right (as the Public Order Act was utilised after 1936). Moreover, AFA activists maintained that there had always been a strong tradition of physical force anti-fascism in Britain, which could be traced back through the 62 Group, the 43 Group, the 'battle of Cable Street' and indeed to British members of the International Brigades who fought in Spain in the 1930s. AFA would claim to be the legitimate inheritors of this tradition.

The objective of AFA was unambiguous - to cause maximum disruption to

4- See R Aylward and M. Hayes: 'Anti-Fascist Action: An Ethnographic Investigation into an Organisation on the Periphery of Politics', paper presented to PSA (Politics of Law and Order Group) 14 November 1998. The paper was based on research which included extensive interviews and participant observation.

Anti-fascist action

fascist activities by whatever means necessary, AFA took seriously Adolph Hitler's observation in *Mein Kampf* that 'only one thing could have stopped our movement - if our adversaries had understood its principle and, from the first day, had smashed with the utmost brutality the nucleus of our new movement'.

As far as AFA was concerned they would tolerate no more meetings, marches or paper sales; as Martell put it, 'only when they [fascists] are too terrified to work in the estates and walk the streets can anti-Fascists be satisfied'.⁵

Organisationally, AFA was formed on a regional basis across England, Wales and Scotland. There were four regions and thirty-six branches, which operated autonomously under the auspices of the head office in London. Although AFA does not release detailed membership figures, particular areas of strength included London, Birmingham, Manchester and Glasgow. The original organisers believed that a non-sectarian approach was essential in ensuring that energy was not wasted in engaging in conflict over esoteric points of political theory. Antagonism toward fascism superseded everything, and this single-issue agenda enabled activists from groups like Class War, Direct Action Movement and Red Action to collaborate at an operational level. Anarchists, Trotskyists and radicals of all description were enjoined to enter the fray against the 'common enemy'.

'AFA would claim to be the inheritors of the British tradition of physical force anti-fascism'

It is certainly the case that at the operational level AFA is far more flexible and sophisticated than the conventional 'rent-a-mob' interpretation would suggest. AFA has sought to make an impact in various ways. For example, as well as playing an active role in 'Unity' carnivals, AFA has attempted to influence the youth music scene through, for example, ventures like 'Cable Street Beat' (formed 1988) and 'Freedom of Movement' (formed 1995). AFA has also attempted to disengage football supporters from fascist influence via various fanzines such as *Red Attitude* (Manchester United), *Well Prepared* (Aston Villa) and *Tiocfaidh Ar La* (Glasgow Celtic). AFA also produces a magazine *Fighting Talk*, launched in 1991, which provides an outlet for theoretical articles, information and news. Indeed international contacts have also been fostered

5. S. Martell, 'The Nature of the Beast', *Fighting Talk*, Issue No 14, July 1996, p14.

Soundings

in an attempt to manufacture multilateral collaboration, and to forestall any attempt to marginalise and criminalise militant anti-fascism. (In October 1997 a conference was organised with delegates from Germany, USA, Sweden, Denmark, Holland, Ireland, France, Spain and Canada). Activity is thus conducted in a number of areas in order to articulate an ideological response to fascism.

Even when it comes down to the specifics of street confrontation the AFA 'mobilisations' are relatively well organised and disciplined (see *Anti-Fascist Action* ((footnote 4). 'Contact' with 'the enemy' is invariably preceded by extensive intelligence gathering and 'scouting'. Objectives are clearly defined and relayed through the so-called 'stewards group'; and in order to minimise difficulties in the event of arrest literature is distributed beforehand which deals with police interrogation techniques and legal procedure. In adopting its abrasive approach AFA has had, given its own stated objectives, some notable 'successes'. The most significant of these 'successes' was arguably the 'set piece' confrontation which took place at Waterloo station in October 1992, which abruptly ended 'Blood and Honour's' attempt to organise openly. ('Blood and Honour' was the organisation set up to control and exploit the lucrative, if largely clandestine, Nazi music scene.) At one level this incident has assumed the status of a 'cultural icon' for AFA members, since 'Waterloo 92' has become an emblem of AFA's capacity to confront and defeat fascism at street level.

Certainly AFA members are absolutely clear on the utility of violence in opposing fascist activity. As one prominent AFA activist put it

...they [BNP] can work a local area, going on about local issues, and build up a nice swathe of support, a kind of comfort zone ... and then we could meet them on the streets and in a twenty minute period all that work is gone in one clash, because they'd be outflanked by a more ruthless element and the damage that does them is immeasurable, couldn't be quantified, you couldn't imagine the damage inflicted, not just physically but emotionally and psychologically, logistically and strategically (Interview 'G', in *'Anti-Fascist Action'*, see note 4).

Indeed it is a little known fact that the organisation Combat 18 was set up in 1992 specifically as a response to the activities of AFA, and in an attempt to protect those activists engaged in the BNP's 'Rights for Whites' campaign

in east London.⁶

It is important to note that underlying AFA's approach is not a moralistic antagonism to fascism, although undoubtedly there is an element of this, particularly in terms of individual motivations. The strategy was based upon a considered analysis which stressed the political orientation of fascism as reactionary, ultra-Conservative and anti-working class. It reflected a belief that any effective resistance had to be constructed around the working-class communities which stood to suffer if fascism was successful, but which, paradoxically, formed part of the potential constituency for any burgeoning fascist movement. This orientation towards and within the working class has become particularly important given recent events and the change in strategy of the BNE

The BNP in April 1994 made a conscious decision to eschew the politics of street confrontation in favour of a Euro-Nationalist strategy which prioritises success via the ballot box. BNP strategists began to work on the reasonable assumption that the general public was unlikely to support a party which had a predisposition for violence carried out by racist bigots. As the BNP put it 'no more marches, meetings, punch-ups...'; moreover, as a key BNP leader explained,

the reason for abandoning confrontational street politics was because it hindered our political progress, and was the only thing holding our extreme opponents together... not that such brawls were of the party's making, but the party invariably got the blame ... and it harmed us politically. Which is primarily why the party has left that sorry excuse for politics behind for good."

This strategic re-orientation did, however, induce some immediate difficulties. There ensued an acrimonious split between the main body of the BNP and the more pro-active hard-core Nazis grouped around Combat 18, many of whom threw in their lot with the so-called 'National Socialist Alliance'. It is perhaps important to note at this juncture that C18 was always prone to internal disputes

6. See C. Sargent, quoted in *Independent on Sunday*, 1 February 1998. In tact AFA received a letter bomb in early 1997 from Danish Fascists with links to C18.

7. *Spearhead*, April 1994; T. Lecomber, 'Red Force: Spent Force of Reaction', *Spearhead*, December 1997.

Soundings

and was eventually incapacitated by extensive state infiltration. Despite the sometimes hysterical reaction of the media, this semi-clandestine hooligan outfit never really posed a serious political threat (indeed its potential to do damage to the social fabric was sometimes overstated by certain anti-fascist organisations, which had a perverse self-interest in exaggerating its importance).

The BNP is a qualitatively different matter. With the socialist left in turmoil and the Labour Party staking out its ideological terrain on ground previously occupied by Thatcherite Conservatives, the BNP hopes to exploit the desire for a radical alternative within the disillusioned (and effectively disenfranchised) white working class. As the BNP's Tony Lecomber put it:

... the BNP will almost certainly make its next breakthrough in a run-down working-class area. The people who have been abandoned by Labour and who have never been represented by the Tories will, in their desperation, turn to us... We are the radical opposition; we speak for the put-upon working class and increasingly for the middle class as well; we set the agenda. We are the future ... ('Red Force', see note7)

By overtly and explicitly rejecting violence, the BNP was making a concerted pitch for hearts and minds. In the general election of May 1997 the BNP stood fifty candidates and was thereby able to produce a party political broadcast and distribute 2,250,000 leaflets. So in a sense the fascists in the BNP have made a clear effort to re-invent themselves as a 'respectable' 'radical' alternative within the political mainstream. Perhaps more significantly, in attempting to secure this position, they may yet be provided with political space through an emphasis on certain key issues. For example, by exploiting their conception of nationhood the BNP could quite possibly attract support in opposition to European integration, devolution, immigration levels and so on.

All of this poses difficult strategic and tactical questions for anti-fascists, particularly AFA. AFA was designed specifically to combat the physical presence of fascism, and AFA was able to differentiate itself from other anti-fascist groups by the extent to which it was successful in achieving this. Now 'the enemy' is changing and becoming far more sophisticated. As AFA's internal documentation acknowledges'... there is a serious danger that AFA, without the physical challenge for which it was designed, will itself lose direction

and begin to atrophy'.⁸ The problem is not so much in dealing with the threat of fascists on the streets but in constructing a tactical paradigm capable of forestalling the insidious drift of politics toward the fascists waiting on the extreme right.

In attempting to come to terms with this AFA has adopted a strategy of 'graduated and flexible response' (to borrow from the terminology of nuclear deterrence). That is, AFA has committed itself to responding to BNP initiatives at every level, even if this entails entering what might be termed 'conventional politics'. However, it must be said that in doing this AFA, given its support base and ideological disposition, remains focused on the working class. Indeed this agenda was evident in the founding documentation of AFA, which stated unequivocally that 'we are not fighting Fascism to maintain the status quo but to defend the interests of the working class'.⁹ As one prominent AFA organiser put it '...our basic philosophy is that we're working-class and that ultimately we want to see working-class people organised in their own communities, making things happen for themselves' (Anti-Fascist Action', interview 'S'). Given this explicit political orientation towards the working class, the broad 'popular front' strategy of class unity has always been viewed as unacceptable within AFA, despite its attractive simplicity. 'Popular front' approaches are considered inadequate and inappropriate because they tend to identify anti-fascism with the status quo, thereby reinforcing the impression of fascism as the radical alternative. And this particular point is critical since,

...the ambition of militant anti-Fascism is not just to see the threat posed by the far right to the existing political order removed, so that the social conditions that gave rise to the threat can once again be safely ignored. On the contrary, it is not for militant anti-Fascism to argue that radical change is not needed; instead our primary role is to ensure that if a successful challenge to the Establishment is mounted, it comes only from the left.¹⁰

In adopting this approach AFA activists have been pro-active in the setting up

8. AFA, 'Filling the Vacuum', Strategy Document London AFA, 27 May 1995.

9. AFA (London) Constitution Part 1.4.

10. AFA Document presented to International Conference October 1997.

Soundings

of the Independent Working Class Association, which is designed to give left-wing activism a new focus and direction. Constructed upon communitarian principles, it aims to facilitate the emerging political aspirations of the hitherto marginalised working class. In attempting this, the IWCA is seeking to differentiate itself from other so-called 'revolutionary' left-wing groups by rejecting sterile 'ideological' debate and attracting the indigenous population of run-down council estates in various community-based projects. The idea is to empower local working-class communities rather than impose a pre-set agenda derived from the 'sacred texts' of Marxist theory. In this sense there is an explicit inversion of Leninist organisational principles which stress democratic centralism and the role of the vanguard party. Whether or not such a strategy is sustainable is of course open to question, but IWCA organisers can, with some justification, point to the abject failure of alternative 'left-wing' approaches.

In conclusion our evidence would suggest that AFA is more ideologically complex, tactically sophisticated and mission-committed than conventional descriptive accounts have acknowledged. Individual members are unquestionably animated by non-egoistic motives and the organisation itself provides an important reference point in terms of facilitating common purpose and the formation of political identity. In short, the simplistic 'rent-a-mob' epithet is well wide of the mark. In fact, when it comes to evaluating the role of anti-fascists in opposing the political message espoused by certain fascist groups, it would be unwise to underestimate the impact and importance of Anti-Fascist Action. However, there is no doubt that the tactical re-orientation of the BNP now presents, at least potentially, far greater challenges for AFA and indeed all those who would seek to oppose fascism.