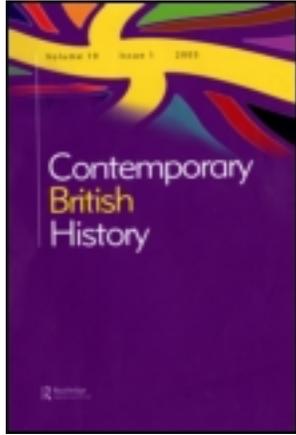


This article was downloaded by: [University College Dublin]

On: 17 October 2012, At: 09:25

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Contemporary British History

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fcbh20>

WITNESS SEMINAR: Anti-Fascism in 1970s Huddersfield

Paul Ward ^a, Graham Hellowell ^a & Sally Lloyd ^a

^a History Division, University of Huddersfield, Queensgate, Huddersfield, HD1 3DH, UK E-mail:

Version of record first published: 18 Aug 2006.

To cite this article: Paul Ward, Graham Hellowell & Sally Lloyd (2006): WITNESS SEMINAR: Anti-Fascism in 1970s Huddersfield, Contemporary British History, 20:1, 119-133

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13619460500444981>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Witness Seminar: Anti-Fascism in 1970s Huddersfield

Paul Ward with Graham Hellawell and Sally Lloyd

This article consists of an edited transcript of a witness seminar on campaigning against the National Front in Huddersfield in the 1970s. The participants were from a range of left-wing, union, student and immigrant organisations, reflecting the coalition of groups that came together to oppose the recently established anti-immigrant party that had high hopes of making a breakthrough in the West Yorkshire town. The participants discussed their activities in the 1970s and the efficacy and morality of their strategies to defeat those they branded as Nazis.

In the late 1960s the newly formed neo-fascist and anti-immigrant party the National Front (NF) identified Huddersfield in West Yorkshire as an area in which it might achieve major growth.¹ The NF saw the town in the foothills of the Pennines as one of its best prospects, alongside Wolverhampton in the West Midlands which had a decade-long history of racist politics running through Cyril Osbourne, Peter Griffiths and Enoch Powell. Like the West Midlands, Huddersfield was experiencing a wave of non-white immigration as people were drawn from South Asia and the West Indies by employment in the textile mills, foundries, engineering and chemical works, as well as public transport. These migrants were in quite small numbers. In 1971 the population of the West Riding stood at 3.8 million, and it was estimated that there were only 85,000 non-white immigrants – that is 2.3 per cent of the population.² In Huddersfield, with a population of 131,000, there were perhaps 5,000 West Indians, 4,000 Pakistanis and 1,000 Indians, 7.6 per cent of the population.³

The NF in Huddersfield had felt emboldened by Powell's 'rivers of blood' speech in April 1968. One NF member in the town told the journalist Paul Foot that

Paul Ward is Senior Lecturer in Modern British History at the University of Huddersfield, where Graham Hellawell and Sally Lloyd were students when the seminar was held. Correspondence to: Paul Ward, History Division, University of Huddersfield, Queensgate, Huddersfield, HD1 3DH, UK. Email: p.j.ward@hud.ac.uk

We held a march in support of what Powell said and we signed eight people up as members of the branch that afternoon. Powell's speeches gave our membership and morale a tremendous boost. Before Powell spoke we were getting only cranks and perverts. After his speeches we started to attract, in a secret sort of way, the right-wing members of the Tory organisations.⁴

In 1969 the NF stood nine candidates in local elections in the town, receiving an average of 12 per cent per candidate. In 1970 they stood in 13 of the 15 wards and averaged more than 10 per cent of votes.⁵ It is little wonder that Eddy Morrison, an NF member at the time, should say that A.K. Chesterton, the party leader, 'was particularly impressed by the Huddersfield membership and the fact that they had their own Headquarters in the town'.⁶ In addition, the branch attracted sufficient attention to become the subject of academic study.⁷

Huddersfield was a town with a strong Liberal and Labour tradition, and the emergence of the NF was met with concerted opposition. This essay provides a summary of a witness seminar held at the University of Huddersfield on 3 May 2003, sponsored by the History Department and Huddersfield Trades Council, organised to gather oral accounts of that opposition and the debates about the strategies to be employed to oppose the NF.⁸ This account provides an opportunity for historians of the left to examine the experiences and perceptions of political activity at a local level, although in the circumstances of national events. It is also possible to consider the 'archaeology' of the local left-wing activism: the relationships and encounters between different organisations and individuals operating within the quite small world of labour, trade union and anti-fascist activism.⁹

Much of the opposition to fascism was organised through the Trades Council, which acted as a meeting point for the trade unions, the radical left and newly established immigrant organisations within the town. In particular, the Communist Party was influential within the Trades Council, and Trotskyist groups such as the International Socialists, which became the Socialist Workers' party in 1977 (IS/SWP), International Marxist Group (IMG) and Workers' Revolutionary Party (WRP) were also active.¹⁰ In the mid-1970s there was also a small but active group of anarchists within Huddersfield Polytechnic. There was an active branch of the Indian Workers' Association of Great Britain (IWA) in Huddersfield, chaired by C.S. Cheema, and branches of the Pakistan Association and Caribbean Association.¹¹ Participants spoke about their perceptions of the causes of emergence of neo-fascism and their responses to the situation both nationally and locally. This enables an examination of the interactions between the national policies of the radical left and the implementation of them in local circumstances.¹²

The witness seminar began with the participants introducing themselves and recounting their role in the activities of the 1970s. **Jamil Akhtar** migrated from Pakistan to Huddersfield in 1963. He was a student at the Polytechnic and then went to work on the buses, where he was shop steward and the first black secretary in the North of England for the Transport and General Workers' Union. He recounted his early experiences of racism in housing, where he said that white residents had clubbed

together to buy a house in Huddersfield to prevent its sale to a black family, and in the trade union, where known fascists were allowed to operate with the knowledge of the union leadership. He then explained that Huddersfield had become prominent in the debate over immigration when the Conservative parliamentary candidate for the Colne Valley had made a speech at the 1969 party conference in Blackpool saying that 'if you cook a curry in Birkby, you can smell it in Blackpool'. In the same year, when a local Conservative had invited Enoch Powell to speak (he did not come), and in 1970, when the NF held a meeting, there were minor disturbances at Sparrow Park and Greenhead Park respectively. One of the participants in the seminar, **Faisal Khan**, recalled that at Sparrow Park, about 50 NF demonstrators attacked a Pakistani cafe, but having been forewarned counter-demonstrators had armed themselves with hockey sticks and gave the Front 'a thumping' after debilitating them with chilli powder. In a clear account of exaggeration, the local *National Front Bulletin* wrote of their meeting at Greenhead Park in July 1970 that it 'brought out the reds in force. Some of them armed with hockey sticks chased young Britons from [the park]. The most significant thing was that of the 750 Communists present, 99.9 per cent were coloured.'¹³ Khan was, like Akhtar, a bus worker, trade union activist and a member of the Pakistan Association, having migrated to Britain in 1961. He said that it had taken him three years for the Labour Party organiser to allow him to join the party and then when he succeeded and said that two of his Pakistani friends also wanted to join he was asked whether they were seeking to take over the party. It was clear from the seminar that the local Labour party was not putting itself at the forefront of countering racism in the town because it feared the consequences from its own members and voters.¹⁴

Much of the opposition to the NF in the early 1970s was organised by the Trades Council, of which **Bob Stoker** was a member, with his brother and father, who was the chairman. They were also members of the Communist party. Stoker said that the branch had about 80 members and was 'very much a working class kind of branch' containing some leading Communists such as Reg Cross, who was a convener at ICI and president of the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers. The party and the Trades Council, he said, also had links with members of the Indian Workers' Association. Stoker described the 'tension in this area, but certainly there was a kind of broad coalition and made up of the CP, Trades Council and the Indian Workers' Association' that wanted 'a very broad kind of campaign against the fascists.' **Melvyn Holdsworth** was another Communist active in the Trades Council. He also drew attention to the coalition of forces that gathered to combat the NF in the town: 'A good thing about those days was that there were a number of people from the Indian Workers' Association, various Muslim associations, and we were therefore able to build a broad campaign. I think we held to a theory known as popular frontism in those days.' In a recurrent theme of the seminar, he considered the important role that activism played in politics in the town: 'Lots of people at the Trades Council were members of other left-wing groups, like the Socialist Workers' Party or the International Socialists, Militant, Workers' Revolutionary Party.' He argued that these organisations had been strengthened by the disillusion with the Labour government

of 1964 to 1970. 'Wilson's election had been very popular in '64 and everybody hoped for great things,' he said. 'However, over the years the Labour government tried to put a brake on everything including trade union activity. Eventually by 1970 there was a direct confrontation with the TUC.' **Roger Keely** joined the International Socialists a year after he moved to Huddersfield as a teacher in 1972. He was the chairperson of the Huddersfield Anti-Nazi League from 1977. He explained that 'the anti-Nazi work was a part of my political work generally'. **Neil Hanson** was also in the International Socialists, though he differentiated himself from Keely by explaining that he was 'very much a rank and file member'. **Stephen Dorril** was a student at Huddersfield Polytechnic and a member of the Huddersfield Anarchist Group which was active in the Students' Union. He said, 'I suppose the Anarchist Group actually was probably the strongest on the Students' Union executive from 1976 to 1979. We joined campaigns and also did quite a lot of investigations into the National Front, which were started off by a lecturer here in the early seventies.' Two other participants were **Tim Riley**, a member of the International Marxist Group, and **Michael Holroyd**, who stood as an independent socialist in the Birkby ward in the council elections of 1972 on an anti-NF platform.¹⁵

The discussion then moved on to locating the rise of neo-fascism both nationally and more particularly in Huddersfield. Holdsworth suggested that the NF targeted Huddersfield because the prime minister, Harold Wilson, proclaimed his attachment to Huddersfield as his home town and the NF saw an opportunity to channel disillusion towards the government. This, he said, was combined with the poor state of the economy in West Yorkshire. Dorril, who wrote a pamphlet in the 1970s outlining the origins and support for the NF in the town, explained that:

The National Front in Huddersfield came together from various sources. One of them was certainly about Wilson and the Anglo-Rhodesian Society. The Rhodesia question was important. There was the meeting on 15 January 1966, when there was a pro-Rhodesian demonstration in Huddersfield, when Wilson spoke at the Town Hall, and that's when a number of people came together and started to see that there were similar right-wing thinking people, and in the local Conservatives.

The other part was the British National Party that was a small group of people, about half a dozen, in Huddersfield, in the mid-sixties. They didn't do very much; it was almost a clichéd, stereotypical, fascist cultural thing, where they read Nietzsche and early 'Elders of Zion'. They had cultural evenings, and they'd be at each other's houses and local pubs. ...

The other part was played by Powellites, who were probably the most important of the lot. In particular Colin Campion, a local estate agent was the main funder, as far as I could see, of the National Front in the late sixties. He set up a British Peoples' Union in 1969, as an anti-immigration group, which was a platform for Powellite sympathies and views. They had a number of meetings with the Conservative Association, and John Holt was one of those that attended. Holt was a former Liberal, who joined the Conservatives and gave a famous speech which was alluded to in 1969 at the Conservative conference about living next door to Pakistanis in Huddersfield. And Campion was very strongly pro-South African and Rhodesian.

He joined with John Briggs, the key figure in the way that the National Front came together.

So these small groups joined together. I think one of the key elements in the Huddersfield National Front was the role of estate agents. They provided money. Well there was a period when they, as far as I could see, operated almost a sort of apartheid system, of keeping immigrants out.

Keely gave a national perspective, in line with the less locally attached politics of the IS/SWP. He said that 'we were operating as part of a national initiative. I didn't have that much of a perspective on Huddersfield itself,' and explained that

when we fight against the fascists, it's not just because of the racism. We look back to the pre-war period, we have Hitler in our minds, all the time. We have what Hitler did, we have gas chambers in our minds. We also have a theory about what fascism is, a theory about an organisation that is trying to organise under its power people who are not otherwise organised in society, but in certain periods they're festering with discontent about unemployment and about bankruptcies. People who are not brought together by anything in particular. They've got lots and lots of diverse discontents, but they can be brought together under this organisation, a festering bitterness that is a tremendous potential enemy. Potentially death to working-class organisations. And so, you know, we do regard it as a mortal enemy, and I think that was underlying the whole thing.

Such a Marxist perspective, that fascism was the outcome of a crisis of capitalism in which the ruling class would turn to the NF to crush the trade unions in an attempt to resolve the crisis, fitted well with the sense of ungovernability in the early 1970s.

Hanson joked that, 'In a sense we're exactly the wrong people to ask about what motivated people to be fascists because the conversations that we had with them were often very brief.' However, he explained that

In the late sixties, I'd been an active member of the Labour Party in Huddersfield, which did at least get me having to talk to people on council estates, on the doorstep when we used to go round and ask people for their vote. In the late sixties, well it's anecdotal but I think the tenor of the kind of reaction that I was getting where people did seem to be interested in voting for the National Front in places like Dalton and Deighton, what people seemed to be saying is remarkably similar to what seems to be said now, which is that politicians don't pay any attention to what it's like on this estate, nothing comes into this estate, all your local councillors are uninterested, they're corrupt, etc, etc. And at least if we do this people start paying attention to us.

He also described his perceptions of the context of the campaigns against fascism:

I think my clearest and probably proudest memory is how Huddersfield was when we came out on strike against 'In Place of Strife'. I was working at Brooke Motors at the time, and we walked out of Brooke Motors and along Deadwaters and it just looked like there was a large, industrial, working class, and that it was united, and that it was on strike. Now I'm not suggesting that it looked like Paris in 1968, but it's the nearest thing that we had ever seen up to then, I hope it's not the nearest thing we'll ever see. What I want to say about that is it appeared that the working-class movement was very strong and had a very, very secure industrial base in

Huddersfield. I have not now, nor have I ever been a member of the Communist Party, my allegiance has always been on the Trotskyist side, but the Huddersfield Communist Party had a very active, a very broad base, and had a fantastic industrial base at that time. The people sat round this table deserve to take some credit for that. Certainly the previous generation that they worked with, the people like Reg Cross and the Stokers were people who had done a tremendous amount of industrial organising, and seemed at that particular stage in history to have a very secure base.

Professor **Keith Laybourn**, chairing the seminar, said his research into the Communist party suggested that its interests were not particularly concerned with the National Front in the 1970s. Hanson argued that the local picture provided evidence for this view: ‘Those of us who were I suppose, broadly speaking, Trotskyists might be regarded as being much more active on anti-National Front stuff, but what we did know was that you were operating in a town that had a very secure, strong working-class movement, and that made a tremendous difference to about how things felt. You did feel like you were very much part of a strong labour movement.’ Stoker suggested that in Huddersfield the nature of the Communist branch meant that it did prioritise anti-fascism, since about half of the members were ‘trade union workers and Pakistanis, Asian members, so we were very involved. Week after week we were talking about the campaign against the National Front.’ He said that the Communist influence on the Trades Council and in the AEU made them platforms for anti-fascist activity.¹⁶

Hanson reiterated that Huddersfield had ‘a strong Communist Party and a very active Trades Council, with its connections with the Indian Workers’ Association and its roots in the Asian community’ and that the CP was much stronger than the SWP. He suggested that the relationship was that the CP ‘had the broad based movement, and we had the energy and we had the fire and the spark and we seemed to be having a lot of energy and ideas, and they weren’t necessarily coming from Huddersfield. They were initiatives that were nationally led and co-ordinated and inspired and then those of us in Huddersfield would go round implementing them.’

There was then some debate about the timing of the decline of the NF in Huddersfield. Dorril argued that

I don’t think that you can ignore the fact that the National Front locally collapsed from within. Certainly the impact of the anti-fascist demonstrations etc. was very, very strong. But talking to some of the National Front people they enjoyed those, it actually gave them strength as a group. There was a group dynamic to going on these demonstrations, and the violence and all the rest of it. In fact there was a core group of the National Front locally that was one of the major things that they did, and enjoyed. But by 1973 they were collapsing from within. The National Front had thought they were going to set up their national headquarters in Huddersfield. By that stage there was already signs that the National Front locally couldn’t survive.

Local election results certainly support this hypothesis of local decline. Whereas in 1969 and 1970 the NF had stood in most council wards, in 1971 they contested only six of the 15 council seats, in 1973 only five, and in 1975 they put up only a single candidate. Nationally, the party’s peak was in the municipal elections of 1977, when they averaged 17.8 per cent in Tower Hamlets, 13.9 per cent in Hackney, 12.6 per cent

in Leicester and 10.6 per cent in Wolverhampton. They won more than 100,000 votes across London.

The anti-fascist focus in Huddersfield therefore turned towards national initiatives such as the Anti-Nazi League (ANL) and Rock against Racism. Keely explained his perspective on the circumstances that necessitated the founding of the ANL:

I think the thing to bear in mind strongly here is that we had a Labour government from 1974 to 1979. Previously we're talking about a period of a Conservative government, in which evidently there was a lot happening in Huddersfield in relation to the fascists, but nationally they don't seem to have been that special in the early seventies. But in mid-seventies, they were clearly becoming a potential threat, nationally. And I think the reason for that, essentially, was growing disillusionment. Obviously there was confidence in the early seventies, leading to the election of a Labour government, but by 1976 there was rising unemployment, rising faster than it had since the Second World War. You know, by the standards of the time, it was a massive rise in unemployment. There was wage restraint very early on, so that actually standards of living of working-class people, amazingly, were starting to fall for the first time in decades. There were cuts in public services, not actually of the scale we've known since, but at the time causing a lot of anger. Again, for the first time, the IMF being brought in, and this was creating a mood of bitterness and also a collapse ... this was the kind of fear in which bitterness festered and racist myths flourished.

He explained that the SWP and ANL had three aims:

To continue to disprove the racist myths, we fight the racism, we combat the arguments about the huge numbers and Britain being swamped and all that sort of thing ... Secondly, and very important, to separate the soft racists, most people in the working-class had some racist prejudices, ... off from the hard Nazis, and an important thing in doing that was to expose the Nazis. To show who they were, to show what their traditions were. ... And the third aim which we'd always had, was to stop them organising. Don't let them meet, as far as you can. Don't let them march, as far as you can stop them. Do everything you can to stop them appearing as a respectable party. And mobilise to stop them, not on the basis of small groups or squads of people going round beating them up, playing them at their own game, but mobilising ... the numbers.

This led to a consideration of the strategies to be used in opposing the National Front. It was linked to a discussion of comparison with anti-fascist activity elsewhere in Yorkshire. The dialogue revealed some interesting disclosures about individuals' personal feelings to the violence involved in some demonstrations. In June 1974, anti-fascists had attacked a NF meeting at Red Lion Square in London. An anti-fascist student, Kevin Gately, had been killed resulting in much press criticism of the confrontational approach of the IS and IMG. There was also large-scale anti-fascist violence in Wood Green, London in April 1977 and in Lewisham in August. The efficacy of physical confrontation was widely debated on the left.

Riley said that

one of the interesting things ... which never really had an equivalent in Huddersfield was the Asian Youth Movement in Bradford. People like Marsha Singh, the Labour

MP, was one of the leaders in the Asian Youth Movement at the time and they had a big influence in Bradford. We went along to the demonstration in Manningham Lane [in April 1976] and it started off as a sort of traditional demonstration, but then the people were just coming out of the side streets and the houses, in the Manningham area and threw a few bottles and bricks.¹⁷

Keely also recalled the demonstration: ‘one of the things that I so strongly remember at Manningham Lane was the white youth against this juggernaut of police with these fascists in the middle. And you know, the horses, it was a terrifying scene, and I just couldn’t believe the reckless courage of some of these youths. A lot of them were white.’ The discussion of violence as a strategy to counter the fascists drew an extensive contribution from Hanson:

I remember a meeting in Bradford that IS-SWP were having in the very early days of realising that we needed to confront fascists. And we met with Barry, a guy who’s about six foot seven tall and he’s broad to go with it. We were having this discussion about the kind of physical confrontation that it might be necessary to have with fascist groups. And what Barry said I shall never forget: he said to me, do you think that any of the fascists’ people have got any compulsion about breaking a glass and sticking it in your face, and I said no. He said the reason that you’re in this organisation is because you’re a humanitarian, isn’t it? Right, I said, I suppose that’s right. He said do you think that when it comes down to it that you would break a glass and stick it into somebody’s face? I said no, I think you’re right. I don’t think I physically am likely to be able to do that. He said no, but we’ve got to remember that. He said that the people that we are confronting actually a lot of them are psychopaths, and a lot of them are very into getting sort of pleasure out of breaking a glass and sticking it in somebody’s face. What we have to remember is, we’re not people like that. What we have to do is, a lot of physical confrontation as appropriate, but don’t let us kid ourselves into thinking that we are actually capable of the kind of violence. So we do have to work out strategies whereby we do physically confront people because in some senses it’s the only power that we’ve got. But we have to organise it so that the physical confrontation is about how many there are of us, and how prepared we are, not about whether we’re prepared to behave like psychopaths. Because in the end, none of us will do it.

That was a very, very significant lesson for me. And I remember the whole period as being scary. I was scared when I ended up in confrontations with some of these people. ... I think there was a lot of bravery going on. I remember Roger down Brick Lane [in 1978], toddling along with two carrier bags full of *Socialist Workers* and police horses going at him, Roger looking, you know, but it was scary, and I wouldn’t like anybody to go away from a historical recollection of this as though the physical confrontation was fun. Because certainly from my point it wasn’t, and I don’t think it can be for people who come from our perspective.

Dorril also recalled the debates among anarchist groups in Yorkshire:

You probably recall there were some violent meetings. Dewsbury in 1975 at the Town Hall, the National Front march. There were a lot of arrests . . . There was one at Batley I remember going to. The Huddersfield Anarchist Group went to Sheffield; there was a National Front march there. And the Sheffield group thought we were a bunch of pansies really, because they did believe in physical violence. They

believed, and to some extent we agreed, that you've got to stop them organising on the street, and that meant actual, physical violence of kicking them off the street.

The formation of the Anti-Nazi League in Huddersfield was a response to the national situation.¹⁸ Keely, who chaired the Huddersfield branch, said, 'There was broad sympathy for what we were doing. You know, we could get a lot of people to give us a pound, take the card. We could get names of respectable people. I mean we did try and get church people and, and well known people, and so on.' However, while the ANL succeeded in mobilising large numbers of people, many on the left saw it as a front for the SWP. At the seminar the following exchange occurred:

Hanson: Steve [Dorril] is not entirely wrong to say it was a Socialist Workers' Party front.

Keely: Pardon?

Hanson: Steve's not entirely wrong to characterise it as a Socialist Workers' Party front.

Holdsworth: Quite true really.

Hanson: We would have loved it to have been a lot more than that.

Keely: It w... [interrupted]

Hanson: But how far it got away from being that.

Holdsworth: I was going to quote Roger at the time, I remember speaking to you and I said there should be an Anti-Nazi League branch set up in Birkby, because there's so many supporters there. And you said, well you know we've got a lot of support in SWP there, but remember the ANL is us. [Laughter] But you said, you said that to me Roger.

Keely: If I could just come back on the SWP. [Laughter]

Holdsworth: Oh, come on Roger, it's blown.

In Huddersfield, a separate and parallel organisation was established in 1978 to co-ordinate anti-racist activity: the Huddersfield Action Committee Against Racism (HACAR). It formally drew together the organisations that had previously acted through the Trades Council.¹⁹ This seems to have been the first time that the Labour Party became officially involved in the leadership of an anti-racist and anti-fascist campaign in the town, paralleling the national concerns of the party.²⁰ HACAR was established by the town's Joint Council of Labour. The Council had proved a useful forum in the early 1970s enabling the Labour party to meet with the Communists influential in local trade unions. Neither group was friendly towards the Trotskyist organisations in the town, and HACAR might be seen as an attempt to regain leadership of anti-fascism by these traditionally dominant labour organisations.²¹ The Trades Council was also active in other ways. Stoker explained:

There were two issues in which the Trades Council were really, deeply, involved and it shows its anti-racism. One was support for the Grunwick workers [in 1977]. There were quite a few coaches that went down from Huddersfield to Grunwick. We collected, I can remember, at ICI and David Browns [an engineering works]. They had collections for the black workers at Grunwick. Also there were another issue, the deportation of Josephine Thomas... The Trades Council organised a petition against the deportation of that West Indian woman. Again loads of support.

The campaign was successful. Stoker also explained how the Trades Council passed resolutions calling on Kirklees Council not to let public halls to the National Front.²² One of HACAR's first initiatives was to organise a 'declaration of racial friendship' to be printed in the local newspaper, the *Huddersfield Examiner*, which declared that

At different times in the past people from overseas have brought their own contributions to these shores. Our way of life is the result of this mixture. . . . We, coming from widely different backgrounds, and with varying political and religious beliefs, are supporting this declaration because we are agreed on the need to build a multi-racial community in Huddersfield.²³

It was signed by about 300 local people including trade unionists, councillors, teachers, lecturers and church leaders.

The main aspect of the work of HACAR was cultural. Riley described how the committee sought to combat racism:

One of the things that HACAR was responsible for starting was the anti-racist carnival, or festival as it was originally, in Greenhead Park [in May 1978], which over the years became transformed into the Caribbean Carnival, which still continues to this day. It is now a big thing every year . . . it has become a bit de-politicised over the years, but it did start very much as a show of racial unity within the town.

Keely explained the attitude of the SWP to HACAR: 'Certainly people in the ANL did back it, and I used to attend the meetings regularly, week after week. But I suppose that we were always worried that it might get so broad and non-political that it might not be worth very much.' To former Communists like Holdsworth, this breadth was evidence of its success. He called it a successful Popular Front, drawing in some Liberals and religious groups. Its breadth might be measured by its success in getting Bill Owen, star of 'Last of the Summer Wine' which was filmed in nearby Holmfirth, to open one of its festivals.

HACAR's cultural focus mirrored that of Rock against Racism, another national initiative that had been taken up enthusiastically in Huddersfield. RAR had been established to counter support for racist politicians made by pop musicians such as Eric Clapton, who had made statements in support of Enoch Powell in 1976.²⁴ With its dynamic style linked to punk and reggae, RAR tended to involve much younger activists than HACAR and had an element of being counter-cultural in a way that HACAR was not.²⁵ Hanson explained that RAR was an attempt to use 'some type of cultural influence against fascism, particularly with young people . . . I'd like to think that it wasn't very trendy to be racist amongst very broad sections of young people, by the time we'd done a lot of work on that kind of stuff.' Riley recalled that Huddersfield RAR's events were not always successful:

We tried to get an event at the West Indian Club on Venn Street, with a reggae band and a punk band and I got tickets and everything produced. And then we went to see the manager, but he said the police had been to see him and had said these groups are all violent revolutionaries, and there'll be a riot if we let you have this gig here, and they wouldn't let us have it.

The major location for cultural anti-racism was the Polytechnic, where Dorril was entertainments officer. He explained that

There was no official policy, but since there was a group of us from the Anarchist Group, who were all the executive officers in the Student Union, we had a policy, our own policy [laughter] of Rock Against Racism. One of the proudest things I did in the Students' Union was that we had more reggae bands than any other university in the country. And we were commended for it. I'd always been very influenced by Venn Street, a fantastic venue, which had had all the reggae bands. And we did do the Rock Against Racism gigs. We had all the punk bands and all the reggae bands. We did a specific one, which was Aswad and 999, which I think was probably the best gig we ever put on. Rock Against Racism was very popular.

In the late 1970s thousands of people within the town were mobilised in the public displays of multi-culturalism represented by the RAR gigs and HACAR festivals. Huddersfield labour activists had succeeded in building a broad campaign against racism and fascism.

In 1979 the National Front stood a record 303 candidates, although they did not contest any of the Huddersfield seats. Nationally they secured an average of only 1.5 per cent in the seats they fought. The causes of the poor performance of the NF have been disputed. The collapse was certainly caused partly by Margaret Thatcher's adoption of populist anti-immigrant sentiment.²⁶ In addition, though, anti-fascist activists at a national and local level succeeded in stressing the negative message that the National Front was a fascist, indeed a Nazi, party. Richard Thurlow has argued that 'The decline of the NF after 1974 was partly due to the successful undermining of it by the Anti-Nazi League', in particular by playing on memories of the Second World War as an anti-fascist struggle and associating the NF with Hitler's Nazis.²⁷ Again, the positive message that black and Asian immigrants, and increasingly their descendants, had much to offer British politics, society and culture undercut political appeals to racism. The National Front agreed that there had been a variety of reasons for their defeat:

This lie by Thatcher [that she 'understood the fears of the British people of being swamped by coloured immigrants'], plus huge Anti-Nazi League rallies and media hyping of the *Holocaust* series on television in the week running up to the election, with the media over eager to employ the 'nazi' smear, led to disappointing results in the General election.²⁸

The witness seminar was held just two days after the British National party won 16 seats nationally in the local council elections, most of them in the north of England. The party did not stand in Huddersfield itself, but performed very well in some of the wards in North Kirklees, securing a total of 6,000 votes.²⁹ Most of the participants in the seminar are still active in politics, and were concerned to draw out lessons from the 1970s in a discussion at the end of the seminar.

Hanson described his perceptions of change suggesting reasons for the relative success of fascist parties in the north of England:

Thirty years on, looking at the communities where I work and know quite well in the North Manchester-Oldham area, there is a striking difference between [them and] Huddersfield in the late sixties and early seventies, which I've already tried to describe as what seemed to me to be a very well organised, working-class community. The impact of working-class organisations in this town was very strong, and they were very good, solid, political organisations here.

Then I look at the parts of Oldham and North Manchester where I know the BNP are very active. And what I see is not strong, working-class society, I see extremely marginalised, white, working ([draws in breath] can you say lumpenproletarian?) groups that are actually marginalised from the local economy. As the economy has become globalised some of these parts of Manchester are just irrelevant to the economy. The Huddersfield working class in the late sixties and early seventies was highly confident and significant and to a very good degree was politicised. These communities I see aren't connected to anything. And the contrast in Manchester is fantastic. People talk about Moss Side and about areas that are very multi-cultural as though they are the problem areas. They are not the problem areas, those are thriving, sometimes poor, but they are thriving, multi-ethnic communities that are actually connected with the world economy in some ways. And then I go to areas like Moston and Chadderton and parts of Oldham, and you find communities that just aren't relevant to the national or international economy. . . . I find the unrelatedness of some of those white, working-class communities to be quite terrifying.

Nick Ruff, a Unison activist who had been at the local election count in Halifax where the BNP had won a seat, also contrasted the situation there to Huddersfield. 'The level of integration,' he said, 'is nothing compared to what we have in Huddersfield. In Dewsbury and Batley, as well, there's a lot of segregation almost. There's not that multi-cultural, multi-racial atmosphere around, that you have in Huddersfield.' Akhtar, now racial harassment officer for Kirklees Racial Equality Council, agreed with such conclusions: 'When you look at Huddersfield it is a multi-cultural society, and I think the reason is the Carnival and the Mela. People probably don't give them much importance, but I think they have tremendous effect, you know. We celebrate diversity in Huddersfield.'

There was, however, little complacency. All the participants were concerned that the BNP could make big gains in the future. A significant theme of the seminar was the ability of political activists to base their activism on complex historical interpretations. Their sense of history was seen as a guide for political activism in the present. In the 1970s some of the anti-fascist activists in Huddersfield had been inspired, as Riley explained, by Holdsworth's stepfather 'Edward[,] who was a core member of the Austrian Communist Party in the thirties. He used to talk to a lot of us about his experiences in the thirties. That was very much an inspiration for the people on the left at that time, because he was still a very committed anti-Nazi, and was able relate what was happening in the seventies to what had happened to him in the thirties.'

Willie Thompson and Sandy Hobbs, historians of the Communist party, have argued that 'Remembering is never simply a matter of pure, unsullied calling up of past events. This needs to be stressed particularly when dealing with the politically active for whom

a specific interpretation of an historical event may be a highly salient aspect of their current political standpoint.³⁰ For historians, this means that care must be taken in the evaluation of oral history sources, but without a doubt, spoken memory, however much it is mediated through political perspective, provides a method of accessing the experiences and perceptions of events otherwise invisible in the institutional records of the labour movement.³¹ Oral history can provide an insight into the thoughts and activities of the rank and file membership of national organisations, who often saw their activities through the lens of the local political scene. In Huddersfield in the 1970s activists cast their focus from the local to national scenes and back again in their attempt to construct a successful anti-fascist strategy.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Bob Stoker of Huddersfield Trades Council for his interest and support and Professor Keith Laybourn for chairing the witness seminar and offering advice on the editing of the transcript. We are also grateful to the University of Huddersfield for financial support for this project.

Notes

- [1] For the formation of the NF see Taylor, *The National Front* and Thurlow, *Fascism in Modern Britain*, ch. 15.
- [2] Wade, *Yorkshire Survey*, 6.
- [3] *Ibid.*, 42. There were also about 1,000 Poles.
- [4] Quoted in Layton-Henry, *The Politics of Immigration*, 90.
- [5] Figures from Taylor, *The National Front*, 21–2.
- [6] Morrison, ‘Memoirs of a Street Soldier’.
- [7] Scott, ‘The National Front in Local Politics’, 214–38. Scott’s Fettlebridge is Huddersfield.
- [8] The tapes and transcript of the full event are available in the University of Huddersfield Archives [henceforward UHA], along with a series of individual interviews, the minutes of Huddersfield Action Committee Against Racism [henceforward HACAR], and a limited quantity of press cuttings and other ephemera.
- [9] See also Weinbren, *Generating Socialism*.
- [10] Taylor, *The National Front*, 31–36 and particularly Copsey, *Anti-Fascism in Britain*, ch. 4, provide description and analysis of the opposition to the NF nationally. In Huddersfield there were approximately 80 members of the CPGB, and probably less than 20 in each of the three main Trotskyist groups.
- [11] For the formation of the IWA nationally see Hiro, *Black British White British*, 157–62. For black and Asian political organisation in Huddersfield see Morrison, *As They See It*, 35–47. It was not possible to find a participant from the IWA or Caribbean Association but see interview with Stanley Innis, 18 September 2003, UHA.
- [12] For comparison see Renton, ‘Anti-Fascism in the North West’, 17–24.
- [13] Scott, ‘The National Front in Local Politics’, 233.
- [14] Malcolm Lee, Liberal candidate in the 1970 and 1974 elections, suggested that this was the case, see oral history interview, 8 May 2003, UHA.

- [15] There were a few women active in the International Socialists, Workers Revolution Party and the trade unions in Huddersfield in the 1970s, but the anti-fascist left was masculine in complexion and, to some extent, outlook.
- [16] The Trades Council minutes are missing for the early 1970s. Those for the period 1975–1985 are in West Yorkshire Archives: Kirklees [henceforward WYA: Kirklees], Central Library, Huddersfield.
- [17] The demonstration had been in response to a St George's Day rally by the NF. For analysis of the counter-demonstration as 'a minor spontaneous insurrection' by young Asian and West Indians see Ballard, 'Up Against the Front'. For the Asian Youth Movement see Perks, 'You're Different', 67–74.
- [18] For the ANL see Copsey, *Anti-Fascism in Britain*, ch. 4.
- [19] George Guthridge, secretary of Trades Council, circular letter, 18 August 1978, HACAR papers, UHA.
- [20] See Copsey, *Anti-Fascism in Britain*, 124.
- [21] Interview with Jeremy Cuss, 27 May 2003, UHA.
- [22] See Huddersfield Trades Council minute book, 27 November 1955, 22 February 1978, 23 August 1978, WYA: Kirklees.
- [23] *Huddersfield Daily Examiner*, 23 March 1978.
- [24] Renton, 'The Anti-Nazi League', <http://www.dkrenton.co.uk/anl/1970s.html>, accessed 11 November 2004.
- [25] See oral history interview with David Green, 23 June 2003, University of Huddersfield Archives.
- [26] See Layton-Henry, *The Politics of Immigration*, 94–5.
- [27] Thurlow, *Fascism in Modern Britain*, 154.
- [28] National Front website, <http://www.natfront.com/history.html>, 14 November 2003.
- [29] Indeed in August 2003, the BNP won its first seat on Kirklees Metropolitan Council in a by-election in Heckmondwike.
- [30] Quoted in Weinbren, 'Labour's Roots and Branches', 37 note 24.
- [31] See Johnson, 'Beyond the Smallness of Self', 39–48.

References

- Ballard, Roger. 'Up Against the Front'. *New Society*, 6 May (1976).
- Copsey, Nigel. *Anti-Fascism in Britain*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000.
- Hiro, Dilip. *Black British White British*. London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1971.
- Johnson, Alan. 'Beyond the Smallness of Self: Oral History and British Trotskyism'. *Oral History*, 24 (1996): 39–48.
- Layton-Henry, Zig. *The Politics of Immigration: Immigration, 'Race' and 'Race Relations' in Post-War Britain*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992.
- Morrison, Eddy. 'Memoirs of a Street Soldier: A Life in White Nationalism'. <http://www.aryanunity.com/memoirs3.htm>, 16 May 2002.
- Morrison, Lionel. *As They See It: A Race Relations Study of Three Areas from a Black Viewpoint*. London: Community Relations Council, 1976.
- Perks, Robert. "'You're Different: You're One of Us": The Making of a British Asian'. *Oral History*, 15 (1987): 67–74.
- Renton, Dave. 'Anti-Fascism in the North West: 1976–1982'. *North West Labour History Journal*, 27 (2002): 17–24.
- . 'The Anti-Nazi League, 1977–82'. Available from <http://www.dkrenton.co.uk/anl/1970s.html>, 11 November 2004.

- Scott, Duncan. 'The National Front in Local Politics: Some Interpretations'. In *The Politics of Race*, edited by Ivor Crewe. London: Croom Helm, 1975.
- Taylor, Stan. *The National Front in British Politics*. Macmillan: Basingstoke, 1982.
- Thurlow, Richard. *Fascism in Modern Britain*. Sutton: Stroud, 2000.
- Wade, Donald. *Yorkshire Survey: A Report on Community Relations in Yorkshire*. Leeds: Yorkshire Committee on Community Relations, 1972.
- Weinbren, Dan. 'Labour's Roots and Branches'. *Oral History*, 24 (1996).
- . *Generating Socialism: Recollections of Life in the Labour Party*. Stroud: Sutton, 1997.