Filling The Vacuum - London AFA

1995 document by some people within Anti-Fascist Action following the BNP’s decision to abandon the streets. The document led to the creation of the Independent Working Class Association.

In November 1990, at a public meeting in east London, AFA declared that the "working class is the natural constituency of socialism, not fascism. Racism and socialism are incompatible. One only exists at the expense of the other. The success of the Far-Right is due to the fact that the Left are not seen as a credible option. AFA are committed to creating the space in which one (a credible alternative) can develop."

Three years later, addressing a meeting in south-east London, an AFA spokesperson returned to the theme: "While the initial aim must be to root out the organised racists/fascists the motive force behind the attacks - and throw down a challenge to those that provide them with facilities, the long-term solution must be to create communities of resistance. By creating some space, perhaps in time a real working class alternative to the lying bullshit that now passes for politics in this country can emerge. The entire Left has failed the working class, black and white alike, though many prefer to believe that the working class has failed the Left. We are here today, not only because they (the Left) are bad socialists but more specifically because they are bad antifascists".

In 1994 in a widely distributed expose of the Anti-Nazi League [Don't Believe the Hype], AFA was even more specific. “The BNP can be stopped and on many occasions up and down the country AFA has physically stopped them. However we are not blind to the fact that the fight is political, and accept that the resurgence of support for the Far-Right is a symptom of a deeper malaise. We do not see it as our job to campaign for Labour. It is not AFA's role to argue that change is not needed. The function of anti-fascism is not to see the electoral threat from the Far-Right beaten back so that Labour and the middle-class Left can, as happened between 1982-92, turn their backs on both the social causes and their own collaboration in the political betrayal that gave rise to the NF and the BNP in the first place.”

The ambition of militant anti-fascism is not simply to see the Far-Right defeated and removed from working class areas: the ultimate solution is to see them replaced there. The BNP's attack on Labour is from the Right and is racist, ultra-conservative and anti-working class, Our primary role is to guarantee that a successful challenge to Labour comes only from the Left. Furthermore, and purely from an anti-fascist point of view, as the best insurance against any nazi renaissance, it would be the duty of militants to offer protection and encouragement to any genuine [anti-Labour] working class revolt.

When AFA was relaunched in London in September 1989 it was accepted that while AFA was still organised around the single issue of anti-fascism, "AFA propaganda must
contain a class message" in order "to negate the efforts by the fascists to present AFA as a bunch of middle-class outsiders, part and parcel of the Establishment, working in the long-term interests of the status quo".

Much has changed since 1989, not least the fact that AFA is now a national organisation with over forty branches organised in four main regions each with the physical ability to forcefully implement AFA's founding statement on the streets. In addition other organisations such as the ANL, ARA and YRE have jumped on - and off - the bandwagon. The early nineties also saw the return to electoral prominence of the Far-Right not just in Britain but throughout Europe. The success of AFA on the streets also led to the birth of the wannabe paramilitary grouping C18.

In another tribute to AFA's militant strategy the BNP declared in April 1994 that there would be "no more marches, meetings, punch-ups " A year on, this declaration must now be regarded as a serious change of strategy, something other than a temporary electoral ploy or an effort to court respectability. There appear to be at least two crucial reasons for the change of strategy. One, undoubtedly, is that since their resurgence to national prominence, AFA have fought the BNP to a standstill. In 1991 Scotland was regarded by the BNP leadership as its highest growth area and the area with possibly the greatest potential. Today the BNP no longer visibly exists. Literally beaten into the ground by anti-fascist militants.

In the North West the BNP organisation and morale has all but been destroyed. A similar pattern is emerging in the Midlands. In the South East the fascists have been constantly harassed. Apart from the east and possibly south east they are practically invisible in London.

In many of these areas the politics of the BNP undoubtedly have a resonance, but they are unable to take advantage of the latent support due to the logistical problems caused by the constant possibility of attack and their own profile as 'a party of strength'. One way to resolve the problem would be to recruit, but they cannot have open recruitment for fear of infiltration. In addition the fear of physical violence means that they are unable to bring their more articulate middle class supporters onto the streets for fear of losing them entirely.

The situation in Europe would also have played an influence. Here the fascists, particularly in Austria and Italy, have recognised that with the demise of the support for the communist parties there is no need for a visibly menacing counter threat. If there is no physical danger, fascists do not need to hide behind a sinister private army. The battle for control of the streets need not be fought if control is not being contested. If the end can be achieved without the traditional means there is no need for the rough stuff. In Britain, with the absence of any tangible political threat to their adopted working class constituency the argument for a physical force movement to contest the streets becomes not only void but instead represents a serious impediment to their own political ambitions - only!
Since their meteoric climb in 1990 in not one area of the country, despite significant sympathy on the ground, have they for more than one day at a time been able to control the streets; Bermondsey, Bloody Sunday and the Isle of Dogs being the exceptions. More often than not in regard to the large set pieces they have been humiliated. And even when they have won, the victory has gained them nothing except a confirmation of what already sustains them; that Labour and the Left are increasingly alien to working class people. So in a sense for them simply to continue with the strategy of "marches, meetings, punch ups" only provides an enemy that has already lost the fundamental arguments - Labour/ANL/Trotskyism, etc. (or in the case of AFA which has failed to put an argument) - with a legitimate political excuse/focus, ie: anti-BNP. The BNP policy of open swaggering aggression also affords an organisation like AFA a legitimate opportunity to answer in kind, and in doing so physically destroy the BNP's political prospects by crippling its infra-structure. With AFA having no political prospects of its own they are on a hiding to nothing.

It takes two to tango, so what of AFA's reason for being if the BNP decide that they don't want to play anymore? Certainly in London, AFA has only been able to seriously damage the Far-Right once recently. If this is a permanent change of plan there is a serious danger that AFA, without the physical challenge for which it was designed, will itself begin to lose direction and begin to atrophy.

The flip side of the coin is that C18, who have no electoral ambitions either, don't do anything but 'play'. The ideal solution for both the State and the Far-Right would be for AFA to get locked into a clandestine gang war with C18, thereby allowing the State to select candidates of their own choosing for periods of lengthy incarceration. That done, the now entirely legal BNP could go about their lawful business like their European counterparts, articulating 'genuine racial concerns' unhindered.

Furthermore, if the BNP operation is made entirely legal and if AFA physically opposes them, then our operation is de facto illegal. The BNP then might reasonably expect, in return for their collaboration with the forces of law and order, that the tactic of summary arrest be employed against AFA on a consistent basis. Circumstances are changing and AFA needs to adapt.

Fascism is the vanguard of reaction. It is at once the manifestation, the contributory cause and principle beneficiary of society's decomposition. Unlike the rest of the anti-racist Left, AFA's emphasis has always been on the political danger represented by fascism, while others such as Searchlight and the ANL have laid the emphasis on their violent and criminal tendencies. In addition they refuse or are unwilling to recognise that anti-fascism is by definition a rearguard action and that fascism is the consequence, rather than the cause, of the Left's failure. Inevitably the strategies adopted to combat fascism carry with them the germs of the strategies that caused fascism, invariably leading to compound failure. So while it cannot be denied that the ANL's media campaign focused public attention on the problem, it also proved to be a distraction in regard to the solution.
One of AFA's strengths in its formative years was its limited platform; the 'single issue'. This concentration weeded out or repelled the sectarians, the 'tough talkers' and the dilettantes. However, during the Isle of Dogs campaign, the 'single issue' exposed AFA's limitations. AFA had to nothing to say on the principle business.

AFA has long recognised that once the Far-Right is allowed to mobilise, is allowed to set the agenda, and has passed a certain point, they begin to control their own destinies - and their opponent's. Once that point is reached it would be useless and possibly counter-productive to rely upon a purely anti-fascist stance, primarily because people look to politics for solutions. It might be clear what you stand against, though their understanding of what you stand for will effectively determine their overall response.

As the activities of the ANL on the Isle of Dogs demonstrated (despite blanket canvassing the BNP vote actually rose by 30%), an anti-fascist message on its own would find little favour with working class people, even those repelled by the BNP, if they suspected that it was simply a spoiling tactic, carried out by allies of the local Labour establishment in an effort to maintain the status quo. AFA has never fought to maintain the status quo, but, even at their most effective, antifascist militants can never hope to achieve anything more than to maintain that vacuum. There is little doubt that the vacuum has been successfully maintained but now, in the absence of any other suitable candidates, it is incumbent on the anti-fascist militants to help fill the vacuum themselves.

The working class is increasingly alienated from Labour, the BNP's strategy can is entirely reliant upon this alienation: 'they really hate Labour' etc. The total ineptitude and the tangible contempt that exists in some areas between Labour and its former constituency has locally and nationally begat the BNP. And fascism begat anti-fascism. In straightforward language, it is the politics of the Labour Party that has created the BNP. So by acting as campaign managers for Labour, the ANL are are prostituting anti-fascism, and instead of being identified with a radical, pro-working class position, anti-fascism is seen to be defending the status quo, thereby practically forcing people who want change to vote BNP, out of sheer desperation. They are literally driving people into the arms of the fascists. Up to now it is entirely due to the cutting edge of AFA that the passive support has remained just that. But it is unrealistic to expect that vacuum to be maintained indefinitely.

Nor as working class militant anti-fascists can we stand on the sidelines, wringing our hands hopelessly. We have to take a stand. And we have to take that stand against Labour. Not simply in a theoretical sense, but in an organisational sense. It is vital that the working class on the estates, seriously alienated from Labour, are provided with an alternative to the BNP. The election of a Labour government will be a massive shot in the arm for the Far-Right. It is also very possible that in the subsequent local elections the Isle of Dogs scenario could be repeated on a national scale, and all our good work in the last decade would be undone at a stroke.

What is needed is a new organisation. In all probability the impetus of the Clause Four
controversy will cause a realignment on the Left that will give it birth. It is not being suggested that AFA disband and become this organisation. It is as vital as ever, that AFA maintains its own structures and agenda. Nor is it being suggested that AFA create this new organisation. This would hardly be possible in any case. What must be recognised is that it will happen with or without AFA. AFA contains the best working class militants in the country. It is absolutely vital that in order to shape the organisation in its own image, AFA is in from the very beginning. To shape it in AFA's own image would mean stipulating from the outset a) a democratic structure, built from the bottom up rather than from the top down; b) rather than appeal to a mythical 'labour movement' the strategy requires an orientation to, and an accommodation of, the working class proper; c) non-sectarian. This does not mean being forced to work with everybody; it means working alongside others towards a common goal, but making no apology for a refusal to collaborate on any project for which you have no enthusiasm, or with those with whom you fundamentally disagree.

In any case it must be obvious that to stand aloof would be an unmitigated disaster. That would allow the middle classes once again to set the agenda. AFA has been dealing with the consequences of their agenda for over a decade. It would be criminally negligent to allow our adversaries to fill the space we have created and maintained in that time. This is an opportunity to add a string to AFA's bow. It will be a complement to, rather than a deviation from, vigorous anti-fascist activity.

Even on a limited tactical basis the benefits of an independent working class organisation operating alongside AFA would be immediate and widespread. AFA could, for the first time, campaign for something instead of merely campaigning against something - and campaign legally.

AFA could be pro-active as well as reactive. There would be no breathing space for the likes of the BNP. And, for as much as an embryonic association might welcome AFA's physical presence, the situation demands that AFA avails itself of a wider political platform than was hitherto considered either necessary or available. For the first time since the thirties militant anti-fascism would be associated with solutions rather than simply violent actions and threats. For the first time, too, involved with setting the agenda rather than clearing up the political mess left by someone else's.

Ultimately the challenge for AFA is not only to destroy the BNP in working class areas but to replace them there. So the political message, to have resonance, will have to be deeper and more comprehensive. A straightforward antifascist parable, a simple refutation of the 'radical' in nationalism will, on its own, prove unsatisfactory.

If AFA's efforts are to culminate in victory we must seek to replace them, but to replace them we must not only out-violence them, we must also out-radicalise them.