

ANTI-FASCIST ACTION

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Which Side Are You On?

In what amounts to a landmark decision, representatives of the Camden Irish Centre became the first people in living memory to ban an anti-fascist event in Britain on political grounds.

An International conference and rally was due to take place organised by Anti-Fascist Action and would have been attended by anti-fascist groups from throughout the world, the culmination of preliminary discussions that have been going on since 1996 involving organisations from as far afield as Latvia to Australia, Canada to Sweden.

Representatives of the Irish Centre insist they would lose their charitable status if they were seen to support an organisation with a history of physical confrontation with fascist groups and because it is "political"; they said: "Our funding would be in jeopardy."

At a meeting on 26 September with these representatives, we pointed out that in fact (and quite rightly so) the Irish Centre regularly hosts political events including those associated with the Republican movement in Ireland and attended by individuals such as Sinn Fein's Gerry Adams MP. In reply to this, the Co-ordinator of the Centre said: "Gerry Adams is an author."

Representatives of the Irish Centre cite the publication of an AFA press release in the *Daily Mail* on 18 September which had put them "under pressure". *The Daily Mail* carried no such story on 18 September or any day since. Interestingly though, an article did appear later in *The Mail on Sunday* on 28 September. To cite a scurrilous article in this right-wing rag as somehow reason enough to ban our events is a disgrace. Remember we are talking about the same paper that in the 1930's run the infamous headline 'Hurrah for the Blackshirts' and has regularly delighted in portraying Irish people as little more than drunken, lazy, phsyotic thugs!!

Officials at the Irish Centre are quoted as saying that they were "duped" as to the nature of our event. This is a lie. The facts are that we had booked the venue in April for a four-figure fee, under our own name and had never attempted to disguise who we were, what we stood for or what the conference was about. Our representatives held numerous meetings with the management of the centre who appeared happy with the arrangements.

Indeed AFA have never encountered any problems of this kind in our twelve year history; we are a legal and legitimate organisation, that publishes a regular magazine. We have organised events such as a 4,000 strong National Demo against race attacks through Bethnal Green, two Unity Carnivals on Hackney Downs attended by over 10,000 people.

Rallies and fundraising events have taken place in the likes of Lewisham town hall, Stoke Newington Town Hall, The Bathway Centre in Greenwich, the Davenant centre in East London, etc, the list is endless. All of which passed off without any trouble.

Indeed we organised an almost identical rally and fundraising gig in the Camden Irish Centre last year, attended by over 500 people and addressed by a veteran from the 62 group and via a video link-up by Cable Street and International Brigade veteran Charlie Goodman. All passed off without even a hint of trouble.

Although by its very nature AFA as a single issue organisation does not and cannot take a position on what is often referred to as the 'Troubles' or the 'Irish War' it has on countless occasions defended meetings and mobilisations by various Irish political organisations from attacks and intimidation by fascist/loyalist thugs, often our members have spilt their blood and have even served prison sentences doing so. As far back as 1987 AFA stewards successfully repulsed an attack by fascist gangs on the Bloody Sunday Demo in Sheffield and in 1988 a full scale attack by fascists/loyalists on a public meeting being addressed by Bernadette McAliskey was halted by AFA members who later escorted the audience (which included a high proportion of elderly Irish people) safely to a nearby tube station. In 1990 three of our members were jailed for a total of 11 years after they had been arrested following an altercation with a fascist organiser who was skulking around the fringes of a Bloody Sunday Demo in Kilburn. Following the announcement of the IRA ceasefire in 1994, AFA members assisted in the stewarding of a meeting by Sinn Fein president Gerry Adams in the Camden Irish centre, in response to a request by one of the organisers in case of a fascist attack. These are just a few examples, there are many more.

On a number of occasions it has been necessary for AFA members to 'break the law' in order to prevent fascists from mobilising. In this we see ourselves as following in a proud and noble tradition that began with those who fought against Mosley's Blackshirts during the 1930's (incl. the Battle of Cable St), fought against Franco as members of the International Brigades, fought the emerging fascist parties during the 1940's - 1960's as members of the 43 and 62 groups and who fought against the NF during the 1970's as part of the original Anti-Nazi League. As anybody who were involved in these organisations will tell you...pacifism does not stop fascists. AFA is proud of its record.

Anti-Fascist Action is alarmed at the potential precedent posed within this ban. It could have extremely serious consequences for any number of political organisations.

We call upon as many members of the Irish community, either as individuals or on behalf of their organisations, as well as any members of groups who support democracy and the right to free speech to register their disgust with the management of the Camden Irish Centre by letter or telephone and to join the picket of the centre on Sunday 5th October at 4pm.

Eamonn Kent

ENDS

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