

ANTI NAZI LEAGUE

A Critical Examination

1977-81/2 and 1992-95

A Resistance Pamphlet - produced by the Colin Roach Centre

This pamphlet was originally published in late 1995, selling nearly 3,500 copies at a cost of XXX It is now out of print, but photocopied versions are available by sending a s.a.e [39 pence postage] and to cover photocopying costs to RPM Publications, BCM Box 3328, London WC1N 3XX

The first section of the pamphlet which appears here has been edited to correct spelling and grammatical errors, the second section is reproduced exactly as the original. Of course, in the intervening years the Colin Roach Centre has [sadly] closed and because of this the concluding section of the original section, titled "Building an alternative" has not been included.

The Anti-Nazi League

The Anti-Nazi League is the largest and best-known anti-fascist organisation in Britain. Its placards and posters declare "no platform for fascists" and "by any mean necessary." The reality is often different.

In this pamphlet, written by two active anti-fascists, the record of the ANL between 1977-1981/2 is contrasted with its record since it was re-launched in 1992.

Much of the material is centred on east London, looking at the struggles against the National Front (NF) in the 1970's and the British National Party in the 80's and 90's. The aim behind the pamphlet is to create discussion and debate, leading to action against the fascists and the system which helps to create them. Comments, favourable or otherwise, can be sent to the publishers of the pamphlet. The authors are both members of the Colin Roach Centre.

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[Part 1: ANL 1997 - 1981/2 written by Jim Kelly](#)

[Part 2: ANL 1992 -1995 written by Mark Metcalf](#)

ANTI NAZI LEAGUE

The following account of the period 1977 to 1982 is by an active participant in the Anti-Nazi League (ANL). Intellectual outsiders too often write history, safe in their armchairs, away from the daily struggles being waged by working class people. This is an attempt to put a grass roots perspective on an important chapter in the struggle against fascism in East London. It is by no means meant as a complete analysis of the period. This would require far more research and the participation of more of the activists involved at the time.

Introduction

The history of the anti-fascist struggle between 1979 and 1982 is essentially that of the SWP (Socialist Workers Party). No other group played as important a role in stopping the growth of fascism, especially in east London. The period can be roughly broken into three parts. The first would be the period prior to the counter demonstration against the NF at Lewisham in August 1977. This was a period of growth for the fascists, which initially met very little opposition.

Racism was becoming acceptable fuelled by media scare stories about Ugandan Asian immigration. The jailing of Robert Relf for advertising his house for sale to an 'English family only', and the strike by the Asian workers at Imperial Typewriters in Leicester, where the white workers scabbed, were symptomatic of the level of racial intolerance at the time.

These events helped to create respectability for racist ideas, especially amongst sections of the white working class. The main benefactor was the National Front (NF), led by John Tyndall and Martin Webster. Tyndall had a long history of involvement in fascist politics. The NF was also building links to the Monday Club, a right wing faction of the Conservative Party. They were rumoured to be attracting small but politically significant financial backing from sections of the British establishment

By the mid 1970's, the NF leadership had adopted the old Mosleyite strategy of building a stronghold in East London from which to build national credibility. The NF was recording large votes throughout the East-End, especially in Bethnal Green where Martin Webster, the NF deputy stood in the elections. Many local people didn't only vote for the NF but were active and vocal supporters.

There had always been a history of support for racist ideas in the East End, back to the time of the League of British Brothers at the turn of the century. Mosley had sought to build his Blackshirt movement here in the 1930's and again in the aftermath of the Second World War. The geography of Tower Hamlets was split on racial lines with a large Asian community in the west, around Brick Lane; the remainder of the borough was overwhelmingly white.

I lived in Digby Estate off Globe Road. NF graffiti and stickers were commonplace. An old Mosleyite, who lived along my landing, had regular visits from local young NF activists. Asian families moving to the estate were attacked, not always by NF members, but by local youths, who supported their ideas. NF members were involved in some community groups and certain local pubs were well known as racist meeting places.

The Left on the other hand was largely irrelevant, often perceived by local people as middle class opportunists. The local Labour party was simply an electoral machine and the Communist Party (CP) was dying on its feet. The CP strategy on fascist activity at this time was to call for peaceful protests with church leaders and liberals, often meeting on the same day and marching anti-racists away from areas of possible conflict with the fascists. This was a sad end to a party partly forged in the 1930s fight against fascism in east London.

The Workers Revolutionary Party had a small branch of the Young Socialists in Bow. They had created a sectarian fantasy world and may as well have existed on another planet. The International Marxist Group appeared like a bunch of sandal-wearing hippies caught in a 1960's time warp. The exception was the SWP. Their attempts to physically stop an NF march at Wood Green followed by an attack on NF paper sellers at Brick Lane brought them a lot of local publicity.

It was obvious that they were the only serious opposition to the NF. Despite all the misgivings of my Catholic, second-generation Irish background by early 1977 I had decided that the time had come to take sides.

The NF on the other hand was aggressive and confident, polling over 110,000 votes in the 1976 GLC elections. Many of their leaders were

seriously talking of winning parliamentary seats in East London at the next General Election. Their membership was increasing and they claimed to be on the verge of becoming Britain's third largest political party, overtaking the Liberals.

The NF strategy was to create an illusion of political respectability, whilst their activists attempted to take control of the streets by smashing any political opposition. In Bethnal Green and Lewisham they began to attack socialist paper sales and meetings. They also attacked individuals, once attempting to smash in the front door of a prominent SWP member's flat in Broadway Market, with sledgehammers. Fortunately the door held up.

At Brick Lane, a local focal point for political activity, the Left was content to limit its paper sales to the Asian area around Truman's Brewery. The NF sold at 2 or 3 pitches in the market, including the symbolically important pitch on Bethnal Green Road. It was very rare to see a Morning Star paper sale or indeed any Communist Party activity on the streets. The few exceptions were usually older members, such as Monty Goldman, and their party did not always support them.

The first major setback for the NF came at Lewisham in Southeast London. The SWP had been systematically attacked on their paper sales. John Deason, a SWP Central Committee member, organised stewards groups to defend local activities. This led to a partial retreat by the NF. This was the beginning of the infamous "squads". "Squadists", as they were to be affectionately known, were groups of party members organised to protect SWP activities. The success of this specialisation was later to become one of the most controversial issues within the Party.

The acknowledged leader within Inner East London was a PE teacher from Hackney John W. Mickey Fenn, a TGWU shop steward from the Royal Group of Docks led the Outer East London squad, whose core was a group of fellow dockers. Mickey Fenn stood out, he was an excellent organiser and a wonderful public speaker totally committed to the struggle. I first met him shortly after joining the Party. A decision was made to paint out NF graffiti on the Railway Bridge by Bow Road station. The problem was that the bridge was only a few yards away from the local police station. As we held a comrade over the side we not only had to worry about the passing trains but we also had to keep an eye on the police, who were sitting at the Police Station window, within spitting distance.

The NF tried to retake the initiative by organising an "anti-black muggers" march from New Cross to Lewisham. The SWP put all its energy into organising a counter demo. The East London district of the SWP was to be the spearhead of the counter demo. This was seen as a real opportunity to

stop the fascists from intimidating working class areas. I can still remember the mixture of tension and determination that comrades felt that Saturday morning, there was a growing feeling within East London SWP that events were beginning to move in our favour.

Lewisham was to become the largest violent political event in many years. Many thousands of people had turned out to oppose the fascists. This was despite an earlier march that took people away from the fascists assembly point. The CP was part of that march, as were the official labour movement. However the SWP were able to lead a significant part of the march to Clifton Rise, the starting point for the NF march.

Large numbers of police were mobilised to protect the march. As the march turned out of Clifton Rise a hail of bricks and bottles met it, but it still managed to continue on its route. There's no doubt in my mind that, despite the artillery raining down on them, the police were still in control and disciplined enough to drag the cowering nazi's to their destination.

It was at this point that the whole situation was transformed by one act of individual courage by Peter Chapel, a leading member of the 'George Davis is innocent' campaign. Peter, I believe, had recently joined the SWP. He launched himself into the front of the march. The sight of the Union Jacks shooting into the air and Nazi's scattering broke the impasse. Chapel was quickly followed by a group of his friends and counter demonstrators.

Within seconds our group of SWP members linked arms (a form of ritual left wing bonding much loved by the generation influenced by the events in Paris in 1968), and moved across the road. The march was breached just behind the so-called 'Honour Guard', a phalanx of nazi thugs. This was followed by a few minutes of vicious fighting, not with arms still linked I hasten to add. The Nazi's were physically hammered. Many were clearly terrified of what had just taken place. The NF march disintegrated, with fascists running around in blind panic. Most ran away, a few stood their ground and got overwhelmed by the sheer weight of anti-fascists, including many local Afro-Caribbean residents who had turned out.

This victory changed the momentum of the struggle at both local and national level and it produced a tremendous feeling of elation on the part of the anti-fascists involved. The NF strategy was to win control of the streets, this was to be their first major setback. The next day at Brick Lane we took the initiative and moved our paper sellers up into the market, meeting only verbal resistance from the nazi's who turned up. Many could not comprehend how a group that they had held in total contempt had stopped them so emphatically. I would estimate that we sold around 500 to 600 copies of 'Socialist Worker' in around 4 hours.

Jim Nicholls, a central committee member was interviewed on the front cover of the 'News of the World' in which he said that the SWP 'had done it and would do it again.' The SWP had at last gained a national platform for its ideas. These events were to herald a second stage, which was to allow the SWP, until this point, a small irrelevant sect to put some of its theory into practice. A novel position for an English Trotskyist group

Second period - ANL Mk 1

The political momentum of the Lewisham victory led within a short space of time to the launch of the Anti Nazi League (ANL). This was an attempt by the SWP to gain wider support for its anti-fascist strategy. It was also meant as a bridge between itself and a new periphery. Although many of its initial sponsors were Labour Party MPs, the organisation was totally controlled by SWP members. There were no local branches and no elections. The National Organiser Paul Holborow was an SWP central committee member. All propaganda material was written and printed at Corbridge Crescent, the SWP H.Q.

The image of aggressive, confrontational street politics, which the SWP leadership encouraged, led to a massive influx of young working class people. Other SWP initiatives, such as The Right to Work campaign and Rock Against Racism were also drawing many young people towards the Party.

Some of the new recruits gravitated to the more experienced working class militants and began to develop a more aggressive anti-fascist agenda. This meant clearing the fascists off the streets of East London, attacking NF paper sales and meetings. Stratford, Brick Lane and Chapel Market were the main focus. Hoxton Market, which had a long history of fascist activity, was a much tougher nut that was never really cracked. Attempts to sell socialist papers there often ended with violence. Unfortunately the left was on the receiving end more often than not.

The launch of the ANL signalled a move to the right by the SWP leadership. A new strategy meant working with pop stars, actors and mainstream politicians, especially those Labour politicians who were under electoral pressure from the NF.

At the same time anti-fascist militants were moving in a different direction, organising independently of the SWP and developing links with other anti-fascist groups similar to our own. Contrary to the later accusations by the SWP leadership most of us were also active trades unionists, or were involved with other working class organisations. A few were even rank and

file Labour Party members. Many women, black and Asian comrades were also involved.

This split became more apparent by the time of the second ANL Carnival, which was planned for Brixton in September 1978. The first had been at Victoria Park, had attracted over 100,000 people and had successfully tapped into the emerging punk rock scene. "Rock against Racism" was to become one of the most successful and original contributions to the anti-fascist struggle.

The NF announced that they were going to hold a march to Brick Lane on the same day. We argued for the carnival to be cancelled and to defend Brick Lane. The SWP leadership argued that only a small number of local activists needed to be mobilised to oppose the NF march.

The carnival went ahead. Many East London SWP members decided that the defence of Brick Lane was more important. By 1.30pm we realised that the NF demonstration was large and a potential threat to the local Asian community. We sent a message to the carnival organisers in Brixton. Gerry Fitzpatrick, who was one of the chief organisers and a leading SWP member, was asked to read a statement asking for support. He refused and got up and said things were OK in the Brick Lane area.

The NF march was directed by the police into Curtain Road where they held a rally. This was very lucky, especially for us! We had about 100 people, a mixture of mainly anarchists and the SWP. Local Asian Youth had mobilised and were hanging around, I have no doubt that they would have fought the NF if the march had continued towards Brick Lane itself. We now found ourselves thankful that the State had decided to rein the fascists in.

This was the first public SWP move to distance itself from physical-force anti-fascism. At the time we did not fully understand what was happening, we were prepared to believe that a mistake had been made. We learnt quickly, the SWP leadership moved to have our SWP branch, the Clapton branch of Hackney District, closed down.

We had continued to criticise the politics of the ANL, as we saw this as an attempt by the SWP to move into the political mainstream. We believed a united front with other socialist and anti racist groups was the way forward. We were worried that the ANL was fast becoming a popular front type organisation willing to work with anybody on the basis of the lowest political denominator.

The leadership and the emerging respectable periphery were pulling the SWP/ANL away from confrontational anti-fascism. Instead of prioritising direct action they increasingly courted Labour Party MPs, trade union leaders and liberals. They even made inroads into the guilt tripping "luvvies" market, many people from the arts, previously the sole preserve of the Workers Revolutionary Party, signed up to the ANL.

It was around this time that the ANL held its first, and last, conference. An SWP member from East London, Yanna M, tried to table a motion calling for the ANL to support the withdrawal of British troops from Ireland. The SWP would not allow this motion to be discussed. They argued that the ANL was not a political party and could not take a position on the issue. This reflected the confusion around the nature of the ANL. This period of political confusion lasted until the 1979 election campaign.

Despite this there was a very large influx of working class youth, attracted by the militant rhetoric of the SWP. Many new members simply took SWP rhetoric at face value. Militant, physical anti-fascism combined with the party's professed belief in working class self-activity led naturally to local initiatives aimed at NF activists, planned and executed without the authority of the leadership

This pattern of events was also happening in, Islington, and the Southeast, Northwest and outer East London. Hatfield and Manchester were also involved. It is possible that this political process was more widespread than we knew at the time. Alarm bells began ringing within the party bureaucracy.

The turnover of new members at this time was a cause for concern. Many of the old guard within the Party was very uncomfortable with this new influx of members. The SWP's Stalinist structures failed to adapt in the 1970s, and will fail the test in the future. Political sects should be marked with a "sell by date". After that time they should be unceremoniously dropped into the dustbin.

It was about this time, mid 1978, that the NF leadership became so rattled that it made serious political errors. A march called by the NF for Manchester was banned by the state, which began to see them as a political liability. Instead Martin Webster decided to march on his own, surrounded by a phalanx of police. The sight of this frightened fat fascist protected by hundreds of police further weakened their street credibility.

The ANL was on a roll. There was a national mobilisation. Local people especially the youth joined with us to attempt to stop Webster and his police escort. I can't remember how long this fiasco actually lasted, it may

only have been a few minutes and a couple of hundred yards, but many thousands were mobilised to stop it. Webster was being used by the state, which obviously wanted to provoke the anti-fascist movement. This was an ominous development. Despite this the political situation on the ground was unrecognisable from just twelve months previous.

The election called by Jim Callaghan, the Labour Prime Minister, in spring 1979 saw many violent clashes between the left and the fascists, reaching its climax in the weekend before the election. We were involved in numerous counter demonstrations that weekend. Most ended in violence.

The party leadership was swept along by the sheer enthusiasm of the party rank and file and the support of young people, black and white, prepared to fight the fascists. Any differences were temporarily ignored. There was a fairly successful attempt to kick the NF off their pitch at the top of Brick Lane on the Sunday before polling day. This had been an unobtainable goal for the anti-fascist movement for many years.

The local police had stated that the first group to occupy the pitch at the top of Bethnal Green would be allowed to stay. So party members occupied the pitch at Midday on Saturday, after hearing that the NF had plans to turn up at 6am on Sunday morning.

By 8am ANL supporters had occupied both sides of Bethnal Green Road. The police were lined up with their back to our group on the Brick Lane side. A large group of fascists marched up from Bethnal Green underground station, gaining in confidence with every stride. They were allowed to continue marching into our group. The police did not seem to realise, or care about, what was happening.

One of the leading fascists uttered some famous last words about marching on to victory before he was knocked out by one of our comrades. A full-scale punch up ensued with the police still standing with their backs to all the action. Local NF leader Derrick Day and his Hoxton thugs were routed, with Day running and attempting to hide under a parked lorry. Unfortunately the fat bastard couldn't fit and attempts by our comrades to kick him under were not appreciated by Derrick. Not even a thank you!

Southall

Monday was the big fixture for both sides. The NF had organised a provocative meeting at Southall town hall, the heart of the Asian community in London. There was obviously going to be massive resistance from the local Asian community. Plans were prepared to disrupt the meeting, by breaking through a building behind the town hall and occupying it. The

organisation was thorough with large smoke flares provided and planned diversions.

Unfortunately the Police were more than ready for us. It is possible that they were aware of our plans in advance. It would be naïve to believe that the State was incapable of infiltrating groups that it regarded as a threat. A political decision had obviously been taken to smash the anti-fascist movement that night at Southall.

At a prepared signal an attempt was made to smash through the Police cordon, the flares went off and the push started. Almost immediately the Police counter attacked, with mobile SPG units on the scene within minutes, all hell broke loose, with the SPG hitting out at anyone in their path. The Police met with much more resistance than they anticipated. There were small-scale street battles everywhere. Police units, with the exception of the Special Patrol Squad (SPG), appeared to lose their "command and control" structure.

I remember on one occasion a group of around 40 people was being chased by a group of around ten cops. The chase entered a local park; by this time most of the pursuing cops had given up for some reason, except for two. One of the local youths wanted to know why 40 people were running away from 2 cops! We stopped and so did our pursuers, one stood his ground and lost his shield and truncheon. The anti-fascists had themselves a prisoner. The other cops now caught up. They had arrested an Asian man. Negotiations were opened and a prisoner swap was organised.

The SPG were attacking anyone; it was obvious from the injuries received by people that night that the majority of blows were aimed at the head. People were attacked as they lay unconscious on the ground. The NF meeting never took place. This was to be a straight battle between the state and the antifascist movement supported by the Asian community. By the end of the evening the situation on the ground was bloody and chaotic. For many it had become a question of self-preservation.

The next morning I heard the tragic news that Blair Peach had been murdered. Blair was an SWP member and a teacher in Tower Hamlets. His death and the injuries deliberately inflicted on Asian, black people and anti-fascists that night had a profound effect on the party. Many comrades were shattered after almost two years on the front line.

The last NF meeting of the election was at East Ham town hall on the following Wednesday. The turn out at the counter demo was very small, around 150 people. The NF meeting went ahead. The impact of Southall on

the morale of the SWP could not be underestimated. There had also been major confrontations with the fascists at Winchester, Leicester, and scores of smaller demonstrations that final week of the election. Southall was to be the beginning of the third period, one of retreat from militant anti-fascism. The SWP leadership had by now lost its nerve and had the perfect excuse to implement a policy of disengagement from the anti-fascist struggle.

The third period - retreat from struggle

An event took place a few weeks after Blair's funeral that sheds a little light on the leadership's thinking. Some local NF sympathisers threatened a comrade who worked in a pub in Bethnal Green. It was decided this threat had to be met head on. The following Saturday night comrades met in The Approach Tavern in Bethnal Green to sort the matter out. We then found out they were drinking in The Rose and Crown in Cambridge Heath Road. It was decided to pay it a visit. The fascists were there, a fight broke out and the pub was wrecked.

After the following weeks branch meeting I was informed by a leading SWP member and college lecturer, Colin Sparks, that things were getting out of control. The pub was situated around the corner from the SWP print shop in Corbridge Crescent, and was used by various nonentities on the Central Committee. As I remember his words were "Its too close to home" which I took to mean the Central Committee, not the print works! Violent confrontation as a tactic to stop the fascists was now a thing of the past.

The events during the election campaign were to be the last as far as the leadership was concerned. Events had clearly moved out of their control under pressure from a significant number of working class militants, both inside and outside the Party. There had been a real opportunity during this period for the party to grow. This would have entailed the development of democratic organisational structures linked to the educating of a new working class cadre. The leadership was not prepared to open 'their" party up to these new forces.

The NF vote at the 1979 election collapsed. Some have argued that this was because Margaret Thatcher stole their racist platform. This may be true to some extent yet the main reason was the constant physical and political pressure of the previous three years. A main plank of their strategy, to control the streets and to strike fear into any opposition, had failed. The in-fighting in the NF now began.

After their crushing defeat at the election sections of the NF turned once more to street violence and terrorism. The centre of anti-fascist activity in London now moved a few miles up the City Road to Islington. In many

areas the NF organisation split into warring factions. In Islington this brought a violent, criminal, faction to the fore. Without the need for electoral respectability they were prepared to defend one of their last regular paper sales, at Chapel Street market. The local NF group saw this as their patch and they had local support in areas such as The Packington Estate and the large Post Office District Sorting office (NDO), in Upper Street. They also attracted support from many NF and British Movement (BM) activists still willing to continue the struggle

What they did not take into account was the courage and determination of local anti-fascists like Anna S and her family and Pete G, Sean C, and other members and supporters of the Islington ANL. A short time later Anna, a prominent local activist had her home petrol-bombed; this was the climax to years of physical attacks on her, each attack only strengthening her resolve.

These people were not prepared to turn their backs on the struggle, simply because it was becoming increasingly violent, or because the SWP leadership had lost its nerve. Most of these comrades realised the necessity of finishing what had been started 5 years previously. The pressure on the fascists had to continue, any let up would have allowed them to regroup.

Anti-fascist pressure was fuelling this decline into open warfare within the NF.

By this time the SWP had expelled many of their best anti-fascists. The leadership used two small incidents, one at the Leeds Rock against Racism Carnival and another at Skegness, the annual SWP jamboree, as an excuse to push ahead with their purge. Many good anti-fascists had to go through the farce of defending themselves in front of a 'Control Commission'. This Kangaroo Court operated as a rubber stamp for the family with the majority share-holding on the Central Committee.

Chapel Street Market became a violent battleground on Saturday and Sunday mornings. Support for the struggle came from many different left groups including Labour Party Militant supporters. The notable exception was the SWP.

The few principled SWP members that turned up to show support were soon threatened with expulsion. The local SWP leadership also began a campaign of rumour mongering, accusing one leading Islington ANL organiser of being mentally unstable. This method of character assassination was increasingly used instead of open and honest debate on the changing tactics needed to meet this more sinister new phase.

The fighting at the Market soon spread to the local area. Fascist supporters increased their presence on the streets. We drank at a pub on the corner of Liverpool Road and Theberton Street, The White Horse, which served bad beer, but served it late and to the sound of great Irish rebel songs. Soon a large group of nazi skins began to organise from a pub along the Liverpool Road, The Agricultural. This problem was quickly dealt with by a group of comrades from Hertfordshire. As was a later attempt to take over a pub at Islington Green by local Nazis. There were many attempts to make the pubs in the area fascist strongholds.

In fact the comrades from Hatfield were something of a legend within the ANL in the London area. There can be no doubt that these working class men and women were prepared, and capable of taking the fight to the hard men of the fascist movement. One sight that always confused the fascists was that of white working class skinheads supporting the anti fascist cause. There was an amusing incident in Winchester at an anti fascist mobilisation where the local police and fascist stewards welcomed these comrades onto their march only to end up battered. This was repeated on several further occasions.

The Hatfield comrades were also involved at a very bloody attack on nazi skinheads that were wrecking concerts by multi-racial Ska bands on the Two-tone tour in 1978. There was a gig scheduled for Hatfield Polytechnic. The Nazis had met very little resistance up to this point. The Hatfield comrades joined with other ANL supporters to attack the Nazis at the concert. The Nazi skins were taken by complete surprise as they strutted around the hall. A vicious fight left many injured on both sides, but the Nazis took the worse of it. The Nazis never felt confident enough to turn up at any more Two-Tone concerts.

There was now a core of experienced activists capable of beating the fascists at their own game if necessary. The left held the pitch at Chapel Street Market. The commitment and courage shown broke the spirit of many of the fascists. There can be no doubt that the Stalinist tactics of the SWP weakened the anti-fascist movement.

An incident between Martin Webster, the homosexual leader of the NF, and a young male fascist at a party led to very serious infighting, with Webster being hunted down by his former allies. Others dropped their political support for Law and Order and turned their attention to robbing building societies and pushing drugs. Some attempted to link up with their fascist counterparts in Northern Ireland, the Ulster Defence Association, and their paramilitary wing the UFF.

Fascist violence in east and north London continued. Racial attacks, fire-bombings, and even murder replaced the attempt at electoral respectability of the period prior to April 1979. The SWP invented the "Downturn theory" in part to give intellectual cover for their retreat from militant anti fascism. They also closed down trade union groups, women's groups and other Party fronts that had any links to the real world. They effectively went for a walk into the political wilderness; even the miner's strike in 1984 was ignored for the first few months.

The SWP leadership decision to turn its back on anti-racist struggles in the early 1980s leaves a lot of questions unanswered. Unfortunately we never had the resources necessary to replace those of the SWP. There was no natural political home on the left for many working class militants after the split with the SWP. They had been the best of a bad lot.

A decision was taken to try to break away from the bankrupt sectarian politics of the left. Red Action was formed from the core of anti-fascists who wanted to breathe some new life into the socialist movement.

Looking back at this period, the main conclusion I have come to is that the anti-fascist struggle, in which rank and file SWP members, played such a prominent part, increasingly became a mere membership recruitment campaign. The SWP leadership became trapped by its own rhetoric and was swept along by events. They eventually opted for the safety of sectarian politics. All the same they did provide a focus for many working class activists, who may not have involved themselves in socialist politics, if not for the SWP.

The political violence we were forced to employ was not enjoyable. It was viewed as a necessary evil. Its role was to demoralise the enemy and create a space for socialists and anti-racists to work in. In both areas we were very successful.

We also believed that the SWP had the politics to build a socialist alternative with real credibility. In this we were cruelly let down.

This was the greatest failing of the period. We were not allowed to build on our street success by extending the fight to the electoral arena. Like to-day we called for a vote for Labour. This held no appeal for many people in Tower Hamlets, where the Labour Party has a reputation for elitism and corruption. Paul Beasley, the Labour leader in the mid 70s was a director of the London Docklands Development Corporation, and was on the board of at least 2 local businesses. Being part of the ruling Labour faction on the council has always been a good career move.

Calling for a vote for Labour in parts of east London, by the left, can help the fascists by allowing them to pose as the only genuine "radical" alternative to Labour. At least the Communist Party in the 1930s built on the anti Mosley street work by putting forward a credible electoral alternative. This played no small part in getting a Communist MP, Phil Piratin elected for Mile End in 1945.

Mixing militant anti BNP rhetoric with calls for a Labour vote will leave the left as noisy, irrelevant, footsoldiers for "new" Labour. It will also rob us of the option of developing our own agenda leaving us instead to react to the BNPs.

Jack Straw promised the people of the Isle of Dogs 5,000 new council homes at the last by-election. Where are they? The left told people to vote for these liars. Where does that leave the left? How many will be built before the next election? The election of an opportunist gang of yuppies and local fly-boys has not solved any of the problems facing all the communities of the east-end. How could it?

Confronting the BNP physically is one-side of the coin, in many ways building a political base in east London will be an even harder task. This was the greatest failing of our tactics in the 70s. This failure allowed the BNP to re-emerge. Despite its successes, the anti-fascist politics of the 70s cannot provide all the answers for today A new working class agenda is urgently needed.

Jim Kelly - written in 1995

(The next two paragraphs have been added as we enter 2002)

The struggle against the fascists has a long history in East London, the above is a descriptive, incomplete account of one chapter. These events seem to have been largely forgotten, for various reasons. There is still a need to record the struggles during the late 1970s properly. Socialist groups abroad usually commemorate and celebrate their history. This is regarded as an important part of remembering the lessons of the past. The English left seems trapped in a Protestant, puritan tradition, happy to limit itself to sectarian irrelevance.

The courage and commitment of the many people who stood up to be counted during this period deserves wider recognition. There may not have been events comparable to The Battle of Cable Street with which to capture the imagination, yet there were many successes, and lessons to be learnt for future antifascist activists.

ANL Mark 2

This section has been written by a trade unionist who has been active in the struggle against fascism for many years. In particular he has been involved in fighting against fascism in east London for the last 7 years, first as a member of Anti-Fascist Action (AFA) and later in the Colin Roach Centre.

Introduction

On November 10th 1991 AFA held a march in Tower Hamlets of five thousand people. Members of the BNP stayed away from the event. The march did not attract many members of the Asian community, but it was still an impressive show of strength. A disturbance led to riot police threatening the march, but efficient stewarding prevented confrontation.

Around 25% of the demonstration were SWP members. Earlier in the day, local SWP activists had been interviewed on local radio and discussed the event as if they had organised it.

On the same weekend the SWP held their annual conference. This also took place in Tower Hamlets with over 600 delegates from branches across the country. Discussion centred on a small number of prepared papers, including the longest from the SWP Central Committee (CC) on "Racism in Britain". It stated that 'throughout Europe the whole question of refugees and immigration have moved to the centre stage of politics.' The SWP CC had no intention of moving this "whole question" to 'the centre stage' of the party and offered the view that "up to now Labour have been taking quite a good line on the refugees". As Labour were in their 13th year in opposition and have a disgraceful record on immigration controls and racism this meant very little. An SWP co-ordinated national struggle against immigration controls was not suggested.

The rest of the SWP CC's paper was a record of SWP 'successes' against the BNP, criticism of other non-SWP anti-racist/fascist initiatives and a critical analysis of black nationalism. The ANL is mentioned once.

The paper also stated that 1991 had witnessed a "generalised increase in the level of racism" and that "for the first time in over a decade we are facing a specific fascist group." There are two things to be said about this. Firstly, was 1991 unique? This does not appear to be the case, it was a

year when racism became increasingly respectable. It is a trend which has continued throughout the 1990s.

Secondly, how did a specific fascist group emerge and how come the SWP CC had not spotted the possibility in previous years? Why was it that the party which repeatedly stated that the ANL successes between 1977 and 1981/2 had made fascism "no longer a threat" was now being forced to admit that they were wrong (although, of course, they never used such words). It was as if the BNP had emerged from nowhere.

This analysis suited the SWP leadership as it justified their previous work, or lack of it, in antifascist struggles. By presenting the BNP's growth as sudden it meant that an immediate response from the SWP may be needed. It also meant that the experiences of those involved in fighting fascism in the period after the closure of the ANL could be dismissed. As such, it meant that the SWP's record of refusing to fight alongside AFA in east London, against the BNP, during the period 1985-1991 was given official sanction.

In fact, the real world showed that the BNP's increased support in 1991 was the product of a steady growth in fascism internationally and the organisation's patient work over many years. We shall look at both below.

Fascist support grows

Starting from the mid 1980s up to 1991 there was a significant growth in fascist activity in Europe, with Jean Marie Le Pen and the Front National capturing millions of middle and working class votes in France, the MSI extending its own base of support in Italy and the Republikaner Party in Germany enjoying a resurgence of support following the collapse of the Berlin Wall in the late 1980s.

For a party such as the SWP, with a claim to be internationalists, this should have alerted them to the need to be actively involved in the struggle against fascism in Britain, if only on the basis that the countries and peoples which make up Britain were likely to be affected by a movement which was emerging throughout the entire capitalist system.

In addition, the local election results in Tower Hamlets for the BNP had demonstrated increasing support for their politics of hatred and racism. In the St Peter's Ward local election in 1990, the BNP received 12.8% of the vote in an area where approximately 50% of the local population was black. They thus gained 25% of the white vote. They had gained less spectacular votes in other wards, but the trend was definitely upwards.

Racial attacks multiply

Election results, of course, only tell one part of the story, the period also marked a noticeable increase in reported racial incidents and attacks. The Runnymede Trust had estimated in 1985 that 70,000 racial incidents and attacks had occurred. Clearly the majority of these attacks are not carried out by fascists, never mind the BNP or National Front members, but this still does not make such activities any less palatable as the majority involve black working class members being attacked by their white counterparts.

The first priority in such a situation is to work alongside those under attack, supporting and recognising the principle of self-defence. This can only be one part. It is necessary to win over those doing the attacks to the side of anti-racism and anti-fascism, by focusing on those who benefit most from racism (of course, some sections of the white working class do benefit from racism) and fascism - the employers and their system. By creating the conditions for unity in struggle, a way is paved to creating a better society for all, black and white.

By ignoring the rise of fascism, the massive increase in racist attacks and by failing to develop a strategy to win over racists and fascists, the SWP failed as an organisation to address the problems facing working class people. The 1991 SWP Conference maintained the failure as the fascists strove to extend their base of support in England, Scotland and Wales. They also attempted to build stronger links with the loyalists in N.Ireland.

Fascism and loyalism

As an aside, the authors view on the relationship between fascism and loyalism in Northern Ireland is that the loyalists are not fascists, only because it is not in their strategic, or material, interests to be so. Struck as they are on relying on the interests of British imperialism, they could, and would be quickly won to fascism if a credible electoral fascist movement in Britain emerged. The SWP have failed to grasp what is elementary Marxism when analysing loyalism - that the loyalists can't declare themselves fascist as it would be the end of them, cutting them off from the trade union and labour movement support they currently support.

In addition, the SWP's analysis of the historical dimensions of fascism has always seen it as originating from Italy (Mussolini and the MSI) or Germany, (Hitler and the Nazis). In fact, there is a strong case to argue that fascism was a British invention in the early part of the 20th century, when the loyalist ruling class in Ireland strove to prevent an independent Ireland emerging, based on a secular state.

ANL and ARA leadership clash

It could therefore only be expressed as surprising that less than 2 months after the SWP conference, the Anti-Nazi League was (re) launched in a blaze of publicity at the House of Commons in January 1992. At the start there were problems. The same month saw the launch of the Anti-Racist Alliance (ARA), with Thames Television reporter Marc Wadsworth bringing together a number of MPs, trade union bureaucrats and known figures from the anti-racist black led groupings. Whilst proclaiming the value of black leadership, it included figures such as Ken Livingstone on their executive committee and required the financial support of the trade union hierarchies, which are themselves dominated by institutionalised racism.

The leaders of the ARA were furious with the SWP and the ANL figureheads such as Bernie Grant MP and Peter Hain MP. The ANL leadership proposed a compromise whereby ARA leaders would be given positions on the ANL executive committee. Clearly, even at the beginning it was never proposed to make the ANL a democratic organisation, whereby those who joined would be given the opportunity to elect people to various positions.

Neither were the ANL leaders interested in uniting with ARA on the basis of a common programme of work or aims. Their bureaucratic response to the problems of different people and groups seeking to establish themselves as the leaders of the anti-racist/fascist struggle was rejected by the ARA leadership, who failed to force the SWP into abandoning the ANL and link up with the ARA banner.

The political differences which emerged were generally on the lines of black leadership (ARA) versus "we did it before in the 1970s" (SWP/ANL). In fact as history has shown, both projects have been of little use in the struggle against racism and fascism and in some areas have helped in its growth.

It is not clear who took the decision to re-launch the ANL. The SWP CC did agree to its re-launch but this appears to have happened after the leader of the SWP, Tony Cliff, announced it at a SWP branch meeting in Stoke Newington, Hackney. It seems that Cliff discussed the idea informally with a very small number of close colleagues (Cliff was once quoted as saying that on really important decisions he would consult with only 2 other people in the SWP, Duncan Hallas being one) and then he decided it should be re-launched.

Whatever the exact circumstances, it is a fact that less than 2 months after their national conference at which no discussion or vote was taken on launching the ANL, the SWP leadership were sitting in the House of Commons with Labour MPs proclaiming the virtues of ANL mark 2.

With increasing reports of attacks on SWP members by fascists there were some pressures on the SWP central committee to act. At the same time, the demise of the Communist Party had led to a recognition by some within the organisation that they had inherited the "mantle of leadership". However, they had no basis on which to "lead" and as the ANL represented probably the peak of their limited achievements, the SWP chose the soft option. It meant a debate amongst the membership on other alternatives could be ignored and the reality was that previous initiatives in other areas, such as the 'time to Go' campaign around Ireland in 1988-9, had failed miserably.

The other factors in this were AFA's relative success in mobilising a number of young people, including from within the ranks of the SWP itself. In addition in December 1991 a crowd of almost 1,000 went to Charing Cross to protest outside the hotel of French Front National leader Jean Marie Le Pen. Many young people turned out. The re-launch of the ANL thus became an attractive prospect to the SWP leadership.

Antifascist Action

By creating their own organisation, staffed by their appointed people, the SWP and their colleagues on the left of the Labour Party could avoid having to join AFA. This would have meant linking up with many of the people they had expelled in 1908-82, who had re-formed themselves in Red Action (RA). With RA being the key group in AFA, especially in London, the SWP leadership could not have stomached having the same tussles as they had had with militant anti-fascists in previous times, especially as the latter were now more politically experienced.

Just as importantly, by committing their members to join AFA, the SWP would have been committing themselves to physically fighting fascism. This was a prospect that none of their leaders could stomach and certainly could not plan. The ANL was launched to avoid this and it has exclusively concentrated on tackling fascism ideologically. Doomed to fail 3½ years ago, it is even less relevant today when the fascists have developed Combat 18 and are slowly re-vitalising the "Blood and Honour" music network.

The SWP in east London had, even before the launch of the ANL, miserably failed the physical test on many occasions. During the 1990 local elections in Bethnal Green, the BNP held a Saturday afternoon public meeting in Weavers Field School. The SWP ignored approaches from AFA to work together and held a picket outside the school. The police put the SWP into a nearby field, behind a spiked fence.

Meanwhile AFA took over two local pubs and when a gang of BNP members walked past, around 40 joined the police escort. There were cries of "fascist scum off our streets" as AFA and the BNP approached the school. A short and violent struggle took place, with leading fascist Tony Lecomber getting bottled by a leading RA member, resulting in many anti-fascists getting arrested. The fascists were shoved or ran into the school, many were badly shaken.

Soon after a much larger group of fascists came running up the road and began shouting about getting 'stuck-in' to the remaining AFA members. Led by Phil Edwards, a well-known BNP figure, they ran at AFA who stood their ground and (thankfully, I can tell you) the fascists stopped about 5 to 6 yards away and resorted to hurling verbal abuse. The police pushed them into the school, where a 90 minute rally took place.

During the confrontation the SWP organisers and members made no attempt to join up with the AFA members, even when the latter's number had been severely depleted by the earlier arrests. I can recall the horror on some SWP members faces at the sight of the violence they had witnessed.

A wave of media interest heralded the launch of the ANL mark 2 and thousands of leaflets and posters reminded those who had missed it. Fascism became the key issue of SWP members. Young people with hardly any previous record of involvement became professed experts, almost overnight, about how to defeat fascism. Different workplace groups were set up, with "Council workers against the Nazis" being the strongest.

Waterloo 1992

In September 1992 the Blood and Honour music network announced that it intended to host a major gig involving Skrewdriver and six other fascist bands. Around 1,500 fascists and racists were expected, and for security reasons the venue was to be revealed only on arrival at Waterloo Station. AFA immediately called for anti-fascists to rally at 4pm, one hour before the majority of fascists were anticipated to arrive. "Blood and Honour" stewards were supposed to make the area safe and ensure that "music-lovers" could be transported to the pre-arranged venue.

Earlier in the day, the ANL held a demo in south-east London, attracting about 1,000. This standard activity of chanting, leaflet distribution and paper selling attracted no opposition from the fascists. AFA leafleted the demo and requested support for the later event.

AFA were able to mobilise over 1,000 anti-fascists to Waterloo and AFA security stewards were able to remove, at an early stage, fascists drinking

in the bars of Waterloo Station. Fascist stewards were noticeable by the absence. Many anarchists turned out as well as members of the Turkish Revolutionary Group, Dev-Sol, who had even brought their children. Their leader was to later remark that he hadn't realised there was a difference between AFA and the ANL and he thought Waterloo would be a re-run of the passive antifascist/nazi activities he had attended with the ANL.

In the events that followed, the fascists' plans were severely dented. The large majority were scattered, a leading Millwall football gang leader suffered a heart attack, Waterloo Station and the area's transport system was brought to a halt, and only by finally surrounding and imprisoning the main AFA group, were the police able to control the situation, four hours after it started. The fascists did manage to hold a much smaller gig at which trouble broke out over who was most to blame for the fiasco.

The SWP/ANL brought at most, 100 to Waterloo and they stayed out of harms way, preferring to stand close to the police rather than get stuck in to the fascists. This however, did not stop them lying about events at Waterloo by listing it as one of their successes in the programme they produced for the massive (200,000) ANL carnival in south London in 1994.

A similar 'success' of the ANL was the battering of fascists at the end of Brick Lane in September 1993, which they also listed in their carnival programme. The reality was that the ANL/SWP were on the opposite side of the road to where the fascists sold papers with no plans to 'take the fascists pitch'.

It was only through the intervention of stewards from Youth Against Racism in Europe (YRE), members of the 121 centre in Brixton, South West London Antifascist Association and the Colin Roach Centre that a direct attack was made. By marching down the road posing as fascists, this group were allowed by the police to enter the area occupied by the fascists. In the fight that followed, the fascists were chased in different directions. At this point and it shouldn't be forgotten that there were very few fascists compared to a few hundred anti-fascists, some members of the ANL/SWP did join in the fighting.

Afterwards those who had been most involved in the fighting left the area and this allowed the ANL with their placards to present to the media and television an inaccurate version of events. Whilst this publicity may have attracted some people to their organisation, it did not help in the struggle against fascism.

In actual fact the loss of the paper sale at the end of Brick Lane was not especially important, except symbolically, to the fascists. They have been

able to use the extra time for leafleting and canvassing on the doors of local people.

BNP electoral success

Events at Brick Lane followed the BNP's success in the Isle of Dogs by-election when Derek Beackon was elected local councillor. After a walk-out council workers were persuaded by their national and local leadership to return to work. "Council Workers against the Nazi's" could not organise strike action independent of the bureaucracy and did not attempt to do so.

The ANL/SWP had canvassed on behalf of the local Labour Party candidate. This is a long standing tradition in seats where the fascists have stood candidates. This is, in spite, of the refusal of the Labour Party and the bureaucracy of the trade union movement to formally back the ANL. Preference is given to support for ARA, which was re-launched at the end of 1994.

The ANL, as a broad front, may have difficulties in espousing a revolutionary position towards the Labour Party but the SWP should not have the same problems. However, it is caught with having to consistently campaign for a vote for Labour as it is unwilling to oppose Labour at the polls with a candidate of revolutionary views and ideas.

Some members in the ANL may also have difficulty in rallying behind an increasingly bankrupt Labour Party. However, they cannot hope to alter either organisations approach. The ANL's absence of democracy means that few local branches exist, meetings are irregular and members are not in a position to elect the chair or secretary. The area organisers are picked by the leaders of the ANL, who selected themselves. In many respects the structure of the ANL mirrors that of the BNP, with a self-appointed and elitist leadership.

"Unity" demo shambles

The largest activity organised by the ANL, outside of the 1994 Carnival, was the "UNITY" demonstration with the YRE in October 1993. Around 40,000 people took part, many young people bolstered by the ANL/SWP's and YRE/Militant's claim that they aimed to "Close Down the BNP". This was a reference to their headquarters in Welling, which had opened as a "bookshop" in 1990. Until the demo the main activity to close it down consisted of ANL attempts to pressurise Tory controlled Bexley Council to shut it down because the fascists had broken planning permission in its construction. Countless lobbies and pickets of council meetings had failed. Today a Labour administration is taking the BNP to court and relying on the

state to close it down. It remains open, although the Environment Secretary announced on July 16th 1995 that it must close at the end of 1995.

The march in 1993 was a shambles, demonstrators were funnelled into a narrow roadway with a brick wall or bank over ten feet tall on one side and a set of spiked railings leading to a 20 foot drop on the other side. No attempt was made by the organisers to actually organise such a large group of people into taking different routes to the BNP's headquarters and actually attack it.

When the march entered a residential area it approached the nearest point to the BNP's headquarters - a mere two miles away! The route was blocked by the police and demonstrators were asked to move in the prearranged direction. This was blocked by the police. Some members of the crowd began to throw placards and the more adventurous pulled down parts of a cemetery wall and chucked bricks at the police lines. Few covered their faces, a mistake which helped police arrest people afterwards.

Relatively few police officers stood at the front and took a bit of a hammering. Meanwhile hundreds of officers sat in their buses a few hundred yards from the "riot". Information from inside the police confirmed that they never really feared that the demonstrators would break through.

Afterwards, the arguments which we publicly debated on television and in the press concentrated on who had been responsible for the violence. It was important to the ANL that the police were seen to be responsible. It meant that they didn't have to risk alienating their Labour Party and media supporters by being forced to state that the police are fair game for a good hiding at any time  whether or not they are responsible for starting it.

But the debate also allowed the ANL, and to a lesser extent, the YRE and Militant to escape criticism for their actions. Having mobilised thousands of people, they then herded them into a dangerous location blocked on all sides and open to police provocation. Confrontation with the police occurred at the exact spot where the police had planned. The organisers never had any tactics which aimed to get close to the BNP headquarters. Astonishingly the ANL and YRE tried to present the October 1993 "UNITY" demo as a success.

On the day itself the fascists did turn up, but were forced to see out the day at a pub surrounded by police protecting them from AFA. At no time were people on the demonstration told that fascists were less than a mile or so away.

No role

Since the London local elections of 1994, the ANL has been unable to find a role for itself. With few elections to contest, the BNP have been less active on the streets and the ANL's main role of canvassing for Labour hasn't been required. The ANL have largely ignored the growth of Combat 18, because it doesn't have the street fighting organisers to physically oppose them.

ANL activities have dropped, SWP members are now more likely to turn up with SWP placards. In addition, as in the early 1980s the SWP leadership appears to have decided to promote the view that the best way of fighting fascism is through workers struggling together for better wages and conditions. It is time to return to the trade union struggle.

However there are no signs that organised fascism has grown weaker. Racism has become increasingly respectable. A lull in fascist activities in the early part of 1995 could have given the opportunity to analyse what has been happening, to re-assess tactics and plan new strategies for the future. The ANL and the SWP have not done any of this.

The period could also have been used to discuss what may happen under a Labour Government. The NF grew massively under the 1974 to 1979 Labour Government and despite Blair's attempts to demonstrate his complete subservience to the City and big business he still can only get elected if people feel they will be better off under Labour than the Tories. What happens when they are not? Unable to turn to the Tories the racism and "radicalism" of the BNP could prove a pole of attraction. Young white working class people also remain disorganised and remain a recruiting ground for the fascists.

Although between 1977 and 1982 the ANL were a vital component of the struggle against fascism and racism this has clearly not been the case with ANL mark 2. It has misled many of the struggles against fascism, most of which we have not had the space to analyse. It has offered passivity in place of active resistance, set up an undemocratic antifascist organisation with decisions taken by self-appointed leaders, has proved itself incapable of understanding fresh developments within the fascist movement, has been content to cling "to the coat tails" of a Labour Party moving swiftly to the right, and it has placed participants in danger of attack by turning out on street activities without any plan for self-defence or physical resistance to the fascists.

Written by Mark Metcalf in 1995