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In Defence of Violence

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*The violence of the confrontations between anti-fascists and the Nazi National Front, protected by the police, at Lewisham and Ladywood, has received much criticism in the press and even from sections of the labour movement. Much of the blame was heaped on the Socialist Workers Party. **Alex Callinicos and Alastair Hatchett** reply to these criticisms.*

THE VICTORY of the anti-fascists over the Nazi National Front at Lewisham on August 13 has provoked a hue and cry in the press over 'violence'. It is, of course, the violence of the anti-fascists that has been selected for condemnation, as in this **Times** leader:

'The blame for Saturday's violence must be laid squarely with the Socialist Workers Party, whose members and adherents, some of them armed with vicious weapons, came prepared to fight. That their belligerent intent so soon transferred itself from their avowed enemy, the Front, to the police is an appalling indictment of their true philosophy.' (August 15 1977)

The official labour movement has lent its voice to these accusations. Consider what Bob Chamberlain, West Midlands organiser of the Labour Party, had to say about the SWP after the anti-fascist demonstration in Birmingham on August 15:

‘They are just red fascists. They besmirch the good name of democratic Socialism.’ (**Morning Star**, August 17 1977) (Mr Chamberlain should look to his own back garden. Two weeks previously the Labour Party agent for Birmingham Ladywood, Peter Marriner, had been exposed as a fascist infiltrator.)

The protests at the violence at Lewisham are nothing more than hypocrisy. Fleet Street has closed its eyes to numerous attacks on black people by supporters of the National Front, particularly over the last year. Indeed, papers like the **Daily Mail**, **Daily Express** and **Sun** helped to create the racist atmosphere which made these attacks possible.

Many of the anti-fascists present on August 13 were young blacks who know from their own experience the impartiality of the forces of law and order, faced as they are by police harassment every day of their lives. Others had been on the picketline at Grunwick, and seen the police at work clearing the way for the scabs’ bus. Those who had not soon learned, when the mounted police charged the anti-fascists gathering at New Cross, long before the Nazi march began.

Violence is nothing new in the history of the British working class. Attempts by workers to organise and fight have often provoked the violent retaliation of the ruling class. Sometimes the workers have fought back. The anti-fascists at Lewisham were part of a long tradition.

In this article we highlight certain episodes in the history of the British labour movement, when mass struggles developed into violent confrontations with the forces of the state—the unemployed struggles of the 1880s, the ‘labour unrest’ before the First World War, the battle against Mosley’s Blackshirts in the 1930s.

What do these episodes have in common with each other, and with the struggle against the Nazis today? Each took place during a period of economic crisis and attacks on working-class living standards and organisation. Each was marked by the eruption of mass struggles which broke out of the normal confines of negotiated compromise and class collaboration. Each involved outbursts of working-class violence which evoked the horror of the bourgeoisie at these ‘outrages’.

These so-called ‘outrages’ were part of generalised rebellions by workers against the conditions of their life. These rebellions erupted because the normal avenues through which working-class aspirations are contained under bourgeois democracy – the trade unions, the reformist political parties – seemed closed. The bureaucratic official leaders of the workers’ movement were not prepared to act, so workers took direct action themselves.

The direct action taken by these workers over elementary demands – higher wages, more jobs, anti-racism – led to the use of violence, whether in an organised form like mass pickets and counter-demonstrations against the fascists, or in a spontaneous form, like looting, individual attacks on blacklegs. Both types of violence reflected a revolt by workers against the every-day violence and exploitation they experienced, ranging from the appalling safety risks faced by miners working underground, to the police attacks on unemployed marches in the 1930s. Frustrations that had accumulated beneath the surface for many years now exploded.

In every case, the mass revolts we describe evoked far greater violence on the part of the forces of the state. The violent outbursts by workers dwindle into nothing when compared with the armed might used by the capitalists to crush them.

Two Bloody Sundays

THE 1880s were years dominated by the economic crisis that lasted from 1882 to 1887. Unemployment among trade unionists reached 10.2 per cent in 1886. [1] The misery caused by the depression was most severe among the unorganised casual labourers in the East End of London. These workers were ignored by the established trade union movement, which was dominated by highly conservative skilled craftsmen. It was left to the tiny group of revolutionary socialists in the newly formed Social Democratic Federation to agitate among the unemployed of East London.

On February 8 1886 the SDF called an unemployed rally in Trafalgar Square. Provoked by jeers from the clubs as they marched along Pall Mall, the unemployed stoned the buildings and carriages of the wealthy and looted a number of West End shops.

A wave of hysterical fear and anger swept through the ruling class. **The Times** demanded exemplary action against the SDF leaders:

‘If MESSRS BURNS and HYNDMAN are not arrested already, they ought to be arrested this morning. No fear of making martyrs of them ought to stand in the way of their punishment.’ (February 9 1886) [2]

The unemployed agitation continued. Demonstrations took place in Birmingham, Norwich, and other centres, developing into more rioting in Leicester. The SDF continued its campaign into ... 1887. Many unemployed workers assembled daily in Trafalgar Square to hear the speeches of socialist agitators and join in demonstrations. The wrath of the **Times** waxed even stronger. Welcoming the execution on trumped up charges of a group of Anarchists in Chicago, it declared:

‘If the people of the United States do not hesitate when order is persistently disturbed to restore it with a strong hand, why should we be afraid to give effect to the general will.’ (November 12 1887) [3]

The Times got its way. Throughout October 1887 mounted police baton charged the unemployed in Trafalgar Square. On November 8 the Tory government of Lord Salisbury banned all meetings in the Square. The ban met with a united response embracing socialists, Irish nationalists and the radical wing of the Liberal Party. A demonstration was called in Trafalgar Square on November 13 in defiance of the ban and to protest against repression in Ireland.

The separate contingents of demonstrators were baton charged by mounted and foot police as they made their way to Trafalgar Square. Once in the Square they were confronted with more police and a regiment of Guardsmen with fixed bayonets and loaded guns, who set upon them again. Three people were killed; and many others injured. **The Times** reported 'great rejoicings all over London, especially in the West End.' (November 15 1887) [4]

Bloody Sunday 1887 was a defeat for the unemployed and the socialists who had attempted to organise them. However, the Trafalgar Square riots were part of the great awakening of the unskilled, unorganised workers which blossomed at the end of the decade in the New Unionism.

Revolutionary socialists like Tom Mann, Eleanor Marx, Tom Maguire played a leading role in organising the unskilled in unions like Will Thome's Gasworkers' and General Labourers' Union and in the great strikes of the unskilled like the 1889 Dock Strike. The casual labourers of the East End had found a voice.

The next great upsurge of British workers took place in the years immediately before the First World War. The violent 'labour unrest' of 1910-14 nearly doubled trade union membership, from 2.1 million to 4.1 million, and chilled the blood of the ruling class, who had come to believe that, thanks to the 'moderation' of British trade union leaders, they would be

permanently exempt from the bitter class struggles of other countries.

One of the most marked features of the period was the extent to which the strike movement was an unofficial one, outside the control of the trade union bureaucracy.

Disillusioned with the official channels, and with their representatives in Parliament, faced with an offensive against living standards, conditions of work and trade union rights, workers took direct action. It is hardly surprising that the ideas of revolutionary socialists and syndicalists received a ready hearing from many workers.

The first great strike took place among miners in South Wales in 1910-11. The militant tactics of the strikers, and especially the use of mass pickets, led to violent confrontations with the army and the police.

The most famous incident was at Tonypany in November 1910:

‘Strikers, beaten back from the colliery by police, expressed their bitterness and frustration by looting shops in the main square of the village. Further clashes with the police took place, such that by the early hours of the following morning, one striker was dead and many strikers and policemen injured, some seriously.

‘... It is clear that the looting of shops was more than the random violence of the rampaging mob ... Action was directed in the first place at the draper’s shop of T.P. Jenkin, who as chief magistrate of the Rhondda had already been involved in legal action against strikers ... Eye-witnesses recall how the looters concentrated on shopkeepers’ property, and “tried to avoid damage to private housing.” [5]

The miners were eventually defeated. But in 1911 seamen and dockers went on strike, spearheaded by unofficial action. Their success in winning wage rises led railwaymen out on strike in August 1911.

In Merseyside sympathetic action by dockers in support of the railwaymen developed into a general transport strike which drew in other sections, like the municipal employees. The mass pickets organised by the strikers led Liverpool City Council to call in 3,000 troops, from a blackleg Civic Service Corps and move in gunboats.

‘The Liverpool strike reached its climax in the week or so following 13 August – remembered on Merseyside as Bloody Sunday. This refers to the violent dispersal of a mass labour demonstration of 80,000 workers by police and troops. This demonstration ... had ... been purely peaceful in aim with women and children participating in family groups along side male strikers ...

‘The dispersal of the August 13 demonstration by police and military led to widespread injury among the demonstrators and mass arrests. Street fighting was particularly intense as the working-class communities of the North End of Liverpool fought to prevent the encroachment of civil and military into their territory in pursuit of demonstrators. “Christian Street is in a poor a rough neighbourhood”, reported the **Liverpool Daily Post and Mercury**, “and the residents in many instances took sides with the rioters against the police, throwing bottles, bricks, slates and stones from the houses and from the roofs. The whole area was for a time in a state siege. We hear of bedding being set alight so as to render the road impassable to the mounted police” ...’

What the **Times** called “guerilla warfare” continued over the next few days. The same correspondent in a most revealing report of clashes on Netherfield Road found that

”The crowd erected barbed wire entanglements on a scientific scale and entrenched themselves behind barricades and dustbins and other domestic appliances”.

‘The climax ... arose on 15 August when two strikers were shot dead by troops during an attack on prison vans taking convicted rioters to Walton gaol.’ [6]

Even though the railway strike was called off after a Royal Commission had been appointed to inquire into the issues, the strike wave continued – a national miners’ strike took place in 1912, while other sections like engineers and building workers came out. The movement was cut short only by the outbreak of war in 1914. Many veterans of the strike wave participated in the wartime shop stewards’ movement and in the Communist Party and the Minority Movement in the 1920s.

The struggle against fascism in the 1930s

THE 1930s were also a time of economic crisis. Millions of workers found themselves on the dole. The official leaders of the labour movement ignored the plight of the unemployed. It was left to the Communist Party to organise the National Unemployed Workers’ Movement to campaign for jobs and increased benefits. Their marches and demonstrations were set on by the police on countless occasions. [7]

For example, Wal Hannington, secretary of the NUWM, describes how the police attacked the huge demonstration assembled in Hyde Park on October 27 1932 to welcome nearly 2,500 hunger marchers from all over the country:

‘The workers kept the police back from the meetings [in Hyde Park]; several times mounted police charged forward only to be repulsed by thousands of workers who tore up railings and used them as weapons and barricades for the protection of their meetings. Many mounted men were dragged from their horses. From the streets the fighting extended into the park and back again into the streets, where repeated mounted police charges at full speed failed to dislodge the workers. The foot police were on several occasions surrounded by strong forces of workers, and terrific fights ensued. Many workers and police were injured.’ [8]

It was in this climate of mass unemployment, inaction by the trade union bureaucracy and ruling-class violence that Sir

Oswald Mosley and the British Union of Fascists (BUF) sought to build a mass fascist movement in Britain. They were inspired especially by the example of Hitler's Nazis, who came to power in Germany in early 1933 and proceeded to destroy all the organisations of the workers' movement. The strongest working class in Europe had been crushed.

Hitler's onslaught did not face any organised resistance from the workers' parties, even though both the Social-Democratic Party and the mass Communist Party had powerful anti-fascist militias. Yet the official leadership of the British labour movement refused to learn the lesson of Germany – the necessity of determined and united working-class action against the fascists. After the Nazi victory in 1933, the National Council of Labour, representing the Labour Party and the TUC, issued a manifesto entitled *Democracy and Dictatorship*. This document denounced both the 'iron Dictatorship of Capitalism and Nationalism' and the 'Dictatorship of the Working Class'. [9] Having condemned both the fascists and the Communists, the Labour leaders settled back to their usual inertia, in the hope that the Mosleyites would go away.

Mosley, meanwhile, hoped, by demonstrating the effectiveness of his paramilitary formation, the Blackshirts, to attract support and financial backing from the more reactionary sections of the ruling class. Already the press baron Lord Rothermere had thrown his weight behind the BUF. One of his papers, the *Daily Mail* carried the headline *Hurrah for the Blackshirts* on January 15 1934.

The tiny Communist Party, with about 6,000 members in the mid-1930s, moved in to fill the vacuum left by the official movement's refusal to fight fascism. It is to the CP, and to a lesser extent the Independent Labour Party, that the credit for defeating the Mosleyites must go.

But today the Communist Party denies any connection between struggles like that at Lewisham and the campaign against the

BUF in the 1930s, especially the legendary battle of Cable Street. Dave Cook, CP national organiser, recently wrote:

‘To equate the SWP’s tactics at Lewisham with what happened at Cable Street ... is dangerous nonsense.

‘Mosley was stopped by the mobilisation of a quarter of a million Londoners brought into action as a result of a tremendous sustained campaign by their mass organisations. A few militants didn’t just make fiery speeches and, overnight, mass unity sprang into action ...

‘The line of historic continuity, between that great victory and the struggle against fascism today, runs through the approach argued for by Communists in the ALCARAF [All Lewisham Campaign against Racialism and Fascism – a group of Labour councillors, clergymen and other local worthies which opposed any physical confrontation with the Nazis on August 13] and not through the tactics of the SWP.’ (**Morning Star**, August 26 1977)

The Communist Party’s argument, then, is that physical confrontation with the fascists actually hinders the task of building a mass movement that will clear them off the streets. Cook argues:

‘In every counter National Front demonstration the question must be asked: Will the tactics proposed contribute to strengthening unity, win wider public support, isolate the racists and fascists, and make more possible the banning of racist propaganda’.

Attempting physically to stop the Nazis does not measure up to these criteria, he claims:

‘The problem about street fighting is that only street fighters are likely to apply, and it is this which can make it more difficult to achieve the mobilisation of the labour movement.’

But the victory over Mosley in the 1930s was not the result, as Cook claims, of a ‘sustained campaign’ by the ‘mass organisations’ of the labour movement. The leaders of the mass organisations opposed any action against the fascists, apart from the sort of bans the CP is calling for today.

The mass movement at Cable Street arose from the willingness of the Communist Party to lead initially only a few thousand workers in direct action against the fascists. Very often, the CP's tactics involved exactly the sort of 'street-fighting' which so horrifies Dave Cook today. They succeeded by these methods in drawing large numbers of workers into struggle against the BUF in the teeth of the bitter opposition of the official labour leadership.

On June 7 1934 Mosley staged a monster rally at Olympia in London. The Communist Party mobilised to disrupt the rally. In the event, hecklers placed by the CP in the audience were brutally beaten up by the fascist stewards. The police refused to intervene, although they arrested some of the 5,000 demonstrators outside the hall.

Olympia was a turning point in mobilising opposition to the BUF. For Phil Piratin, later Communist MP for Mile End after 1945, the experience was a decisive one:

'The exposure organised by the Communist Party was an eye-opener to millions in the country, and a political lesson of great importance to many thousands. People like myself (I was there with two other friends who held very much my own views) understood as clearly as daylight the truth of Lenin's thesis in his State and Revolution. Only the deliberately blind could claim the impartiality of the police, and of the courts, on that and the following days.

'Yet, on 9 June, only two days after Olympia, the Daily Herald published a letter from Mr T.R. West, then Labour MP for North Hammersmith:

'The Communists, by smashing Blackshirt meetings, are as usual, aiding the fascists, and gaining public sympathy for them. We of the Labour Party do not fear the effect of Mosley's speeches. In any event, let them be heard, for free speech is still precious today, although the Communists are such opponents of it.'

'There was plenty to learn that night for people like myself, and plenty to do; not all the police 'got away with

it', and we waited until the meeting was ended and the fascists began to leave. Some of them paid well for what they had done that night.' [10]

Piratin joined the Communist Party that night. Many thousands of others who did not join had been alerted by the Olympia rally to the danger represented by Mosley's Blackshirts.

In future they would follow the CP's lead in the physical struggle against the fascists.

The ability of the Communist Party to mobilise opposition to Mosley, even when opposed by the official Labour leadership, was soon shown. The BUF called a mass rally in Hyde Park for September 9 1934. The Co-ordinating Committee for Anti-Fascist Activities, dominated by close allies of the CP like John Strachey, announced that they would hold a counter-demonstration in the Park.

The call was opposed by the official movement. The National Council of Labour, London Trades Council, London Labour Party, Walter Citrine of the TUC, the **Daily Herald** – all called on workers to stay away from Hyde Park for fear of advertising fascism.

The brunt of the mobilisation was taken by the CP and the ILP. The **Daily Worker** issued a manifesto headlined *Deliver the Death Blow to Fascism in England*. (August 16 1934) A few days later it called on anti-fascists to 'organise themselves as shock-brigades.' (August 21 1934)

As it turned out, many workers, including numerous rank-and-file Labour Party members, listened to the Communists and not the TUC. The anti-fascists at Hyde Park numbered between 60,000 and 100,000. The Mosleyites were outnumbered by the 7,000 police who protected them from the counter-demonstrators.

The Communist Party was identified, both by itself and by its opponents, with the leadership of the anti-fascist movement.

Harry Pollitt, general secretary of the CP, wrote after the Hyde Park demonstration:

‘If ever there was a time when it was justifiable to feel proud of membership of the Communist Party, it has been during these recent months, when each day has seen the Communist Party giving the lead in the fight against our class enemies, a lead which has been followed by an increasing number of workers.

‘... The mass of workers realise that September 9 would have been an impossibility without the Communist Party ...’

That campaign marked a tremendous advance. It exposed more clearly than ever before the supine and defeatist leadership of the Labour Party, who urged the workers ‘to keep away from Hyde Park’.

The line of the Citrines and Hendersons was the line of the capitalist press. With one voice they urged the workers, to listen to their leaders, to be deaf to the call of the Communists.

To this the Communist Party replied:

‘Fight fascism now; its growth can be arrested; it can be defeated.’

[\[11\]](#)

Then as now, the fascist marches and rallies were only possible thanks to the protection of the police. It was the antifascists who received the attention of the police. For example, nearly 3,000 police were called out to defend a Mosleyite rally at the Albert Hall in London on March 22 1936. The anti-fascists, banned from a half mile radius of the Albert Hall, held a meeting in Thurloe Square, which was broken up by mounted police with batons drawn.

After fascist speakers at a rally in Tonypany in June 1936 were stoned off the platform, the police arrested 36 counter-demonstrators. At their trial,

‘many of the accused were stated by the police to hold extreme views against law and order and to have taken part in organised marches. One defendant, who was sentenced to twelve months’

hard labour, had previously served fifteen months for endeavouring to seduce soldiers from their allegiance to the King ...’

Another of the accused, who was found guilty on four charges, was described by the police as a ‘most violent and dangerous man, whose pet aversion seemed to be policemen.’ It was further claimed that he was ‘the most subversive agitator in the Rhondda, with a fanatical outlook on life’ ... A third anti-Fascist was described by the police as ‘a most violent man and extremely lawless in outlook.’ [12]

The Battle of Cable Street

THE confrontation between the Blackshirts and anti-fascists in the East End followed the same pattern as the earlier battles – CP and the ILP took the lead in mobilising against the Mosleyites, who were defended by the police, while the Labour leadership opposed any physical confrontation with the fascists.

Mosley’s campaign against Jews in the East End of London – principally Stepney, Bethnal Green and Shoreditch – was prompted by his lack of success in attracting either mass support or the sympathy and financial backing of a significant section of the capitalist class. This failure must be attributed to the relative ease with which British capitalism weathered the slump compared with Germany or the United States. Mosley hoped by concentrating all his forces in the East End to build up a mass base among workers frustrated by the poverty, poor housing, unemployment and sweatshop exploitation endemic in the area.

His methods were similar to those of the National Front today. The large Jewish population of the East End were made the scapegoats for all the ills of the world. Provocative marches by the Blackshirts were organised through Jewish areas, chanting slogans like ‘The yids, the yids, we’ve got to get rid of the yids.’

Physical attacks on individual Jews were encouraged. Many young workers were attracted by Mosley's message.

Mosley called a march through the East End on October 4 1936. The Home Secretary ignored the calls by various notables, like a deputation of the mayors of the five East London boroughs, that the march be banned. The Jewish ex-Servicemen's Association, the ILP and (after some hesitation [13]) the CP called a counter-demonstration. George Lansbury appealed to all anti-fascists to stay away. He was followed by the **Daily Herald**, the Labour Party, the Jewish Board of Deputies, the **News Chronicle**, the East London mayors and assorted rabbis and clergymen.

100,000 workers, including many Labour Party members, ignored the calls of their official leaders and rallied in the streets of East London under the slogan 'They Shall Not Pass' (the slogan of the workers of Madrid, at that moment preparing to repel the onslaught of the fascist forces).

Phil Piratin, one of the leaders of Stepney Communist Party at the time, has described the preparations of the anti-fascists. Their forces were carefully distributed so that the police and Blackshirts would have to go down Cable Street, which would be easy to defend, being narrow with many side alleys. Loudspeaker vans, messengers on motor bikes, first aid depots were all organised.

(Forty years later the same 'street-fighting' tactics, when employed by the SWP for Lewisham, did not find favour with the Communist Party. Charles Edwards wrote in the **Morning Star** of August 12 1977:

'It almost goes without saying that the Socialist Workers Party has prepared itself for the definitive game of cowboys and Indians.

'It has delivered "They Shall Not Pass" leaflets around the borough, and has even laid on doctors to attend to casualties'.)

As so often both in the 1930s and today, the fighting on October 4 took place, not between fascists and anti-fascists, but between the police protecting the Mosleyites and the counter-demonstrators. The Blackshirts' advertised march along Leman Street and Commercial Road was blocked by a massive human barricade at Gardiners' Corner. Repeated police baton charges did not shift the demonstrators.

Piratin describes the battle of Cable Street that followed:

'It was obvious that the fascists and the police would now turn their attention to Cable Street. We were ready. The moment this became apparent the signal was given to put up the barricades'.

A lorry was turned over on its side.

'Supplemented by bits of old furniture, mattresses, and every kind of thing you expect to find in box-rooms, it was a barricade which the police did not find it easy to penetrate. As they charged they were met with milk bottles, stones and marbles. Some of the housewives began to drop milk bottles from the roof tops. A number of police surrendered. This had never happened before, so the lads didn't know what to do, but they took away their batons, and one took a helmet for his son as a souvenir.' [14]

In the end, the police had to call off the march. Mosley had been stopped. Piratin wrote:

'I find it impossible to describe the reactions of the Stepney people. In Stepney nothing had changed physically. The poor houses, the mean streets, the ill-conditioned workshops were the same, but the people were changed. Their heads seemed higher, and their shoulders were squarer – and the stories they told! Each one was a "hero" – many of them were ...

'The "terror" had lost its meaning. The people now knew that fascism could be defeated if they organised themselves to do so.' [15]

The experience of the 1930s undermines the attacks made on the anti-fascists of Lewisham by the Communist Party. The mass anti-fascist movement emerged in the 1930s because the CP and the ILP were prepared to mobilise what were at first very small

minorities of workers to confront the fascists physically, in defiance of the police, the official leaders of the movement, and ‘respectable’ opinion generally.

Of course, there is another side to the struggle against the Blackshirts. Mosley did not abandon the East End after Cable Street. In 1937 BUF candidates contested the London County Council elections in the East End – they won 23.17 per cent of the vote in Bethnal Green, 16.3 per cent in Limehouse, 14.8 per cent in Limehouse.

The fascist base in East London was only undermined by the determined efforts of the Communist Party to win over Mosley’s working-class supporters by giving a lead in practical struggles over immediate issues like housing, where the Blackshirts were not prepared to act. Piratin has shown how the Stepney Communist Party concentrated its efforts on organising the tenants against rack-renting landlords in areas of BUF support. The willingness of the Communists to fight where the fascists would only talk convinced one-time Mosleyites to tear up their BUF membership cards. [\[16\]](#)

Fighting the Nazis today

THE LESSONS of Cable Street apply to the anti-fascist struggle today. Only the *combination* of the physical struggle to drive the fascists off the streets *and* a class lead by socialists in practical struggles against the conditions which give birth to fascism can stop the Nazis today.

The physical struggle is as important now as it was in the 1930s. The Nazi leaders of the National Front are faced with a major strategic problem. They have succeeded in attracting a considerable protest vote, especially from working-class voters disillusioned with Labour, suspicious of the Tories and willing to blame the blacks for all the problems under the sun. But the

membership attracted by the NF's racism is very different from the hardened Nazi cadre that Tyndall and Webster need in order to succeed.

The NF will only begin to attract the interest and financial backing of important sections of the bourgeoisie, and not the occasional racist or crank, unless they can prove that they are a worthwhile option. This means building a fascist fighting formation that can, one day, take on the workers' movement and smash its organisations. In other words, the NF leaders must turn their membership, still predominantly 'soft' and racist (except for the hardened thugs of the Honour Guard), into fascist storm-troopers.

The Nazi marches through black areas are an important part of this process. To quote Tyndall,

'I believe our great marches, with drums and flags and banners, have a hypnotic effect on the public and immense effect in solidifying the allegiance of our followers, so that their enthusiasm can be sustained.' [\[17\]](#)

These words of Tyndall's echo those of Hitler:

'Mass demonstrations must burn into the little man's sole the proud conviction that, though a little worm, he is nevertheless part of a great dragon.'

By marching unhindered through black areas, the NF leaders hope to create a sense of aggressive self-confidence among their supporters and fear and intimidation among black people. In this atmosphere, attacks on black people will be multiplied, and new members attracted to the National Front and turned into hardened Nazis who one day will be used against the trade union movement itself.

To stop the Nazis, therefore, we must stop their marches. No more than in the 1930s will the willingness to take a lead in the physical struggle necessarily isolate the anti-fascists, as the Communist Party claims. One of the most important features of

Lewisham was the SWP's success in involving thousands far beyond its ranks in the fight against the Nazis.

Some of these were young blacks, particularly exposed to the violence of the police and drawn in, in part, because of the Lewisham 21 Defence Campaign in which the SWP played a leading role in recent months. Many others would probably a few months ago never have thought of engaging in 'street-fighting' until exposed to the police violence on the Grunwick's picket line.

As in the 1930s, the experience of struggles like Lewisham is likely to draw *more* people into the fight against the fascists. Many blacks will feel heightened self-confidence as a result of the victory at Lewisham. For others, the role of the police in protecting the Nazis will have convinced them of the need to take direct action against the NF. Lewisham, and the earlier success of Wood Green, could mark the beginning of a mass anti-fascist movement.

Our task is not only to lead the physical struggle against the fascists. It is to connect that struggle with the other struggles against the conditions that breed fascism. The NF are growing, not because of the publicity anti-fascists attract to them, but because of the effects of the crisis – mass unemployment, falling living standards, declining social services – and the role of the official leadership of the labour movement in implementing these attacks on workers.

In this situation, with the traditional reformist avenues closed to them, workers can either listen to the siren song of the Nazis, or rely on their own self-activity. Our task is to build up that self-activity in the one arena where rank-and-file workers can exercise direct power – the workplace.

In the end, the only real answer to the violence of ruling-class power is the organised power of the working class. Grunwick and Lewisham both hammer home the lesson that the state exists solely to defend the interests of the capitalist class. Workers

fighting to preserve their own living standards and organisations at a time of crisis like the present will increasingly be confronted with the violence of the capitalist state. To defeat that violence will require, one day, a decisive test of strength between the forces of the state and a workers' movement ready to engage in the armed struggle for political power. The road to that struggle lies through determined efforts to build a revolutionary socialist party based on the organised strength of rank-and-file workers. That is why the struggle in the workplaces is so closely connected to the struggle against the fascists.

[Top of page](#)

Notes

- [1.](#) J. Kuczynski, **A Short History of Labour Conditions under Industrial Capitalism in Great Britain and the Empire**, London 1972, Part 1, p.95.
- [2.](#) Quoted in E.P. Thompson, **William Morris**, London 1977, p.406
- [3.](#) Quoted, **ibid.**, p.487.
- [4.](#) Quoted, **ibid.**, p.491.
- [5.](#) B. Holton, **British Syndicalism 1900-1914**, London 1976, pp.81-2.
- [6.](#) **Ibid.**, pp.99-100.
- [7.](#) See C. Sparks, *Fascism in Britain*, **International Socialism** 71 for a general discussion of the period.
- [8.](#) W. Hannington, **Unemployed Struggles 1919-1936**, London 1936, pp.248-9.
- [9.](#) Quoted in R. Miliband, **Parliamentary Socialism**, London 1972, p.217.
- [10.](#) P. Piratin, **Our Flag Stays Red**, London 1948, p.8.
- [11.](#) H. Pollitt, **Selected Articles and Speeches**, Vol.1, London 1953, pp.116-17.

[12.](#) R. Benewick, **The Fascist Movement in Britain**, London 1972, p.212.

[13.](#) See C. Sparks, *Fascism: the lessons of Cable Street*, **International Socialism 94**.

[14.](#) Piratin, **op. cit.**, p.23.

[15.](#) **Ibid.**, p.25.

[16.](#) **Ibid.**, chapters 3 and 4. See also the articles by Colin Sparks cited above.

[17.](#) Quoted in M. Walker, **The National Front**, London 1977, p.184.

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