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Abstract

This article explores how Britain's Black Power movement challenged the political outlook of the anti-fascist left in the 1960s–70s. While the established left interpreted the National Front (NF) as an aberrant threat to Britain's social democracy, Black political groups foregrounded the systemic racial violence of the British state. By addressing intensifying racial oppression during a critical early phase in the transition to neoliberalism, they prefigured Stuart Hall's analysis of 'authoritarian populism'. The British Black Power movement especially criticised the high-profile Anti-Nazi League (ANL) for its singular focus on the NF, which was framed as a revived Hitlerite peril. For British Black radicals, the larger strategic problem was the populist racism, inflected by imperial nostalgia, which propelled Thatcher's New Right to power. Instead of narrow Nazi analogies, they related the re-emergence of white nationalism to British social democracy's racist treatment of Black immigrants, as well as its neocolonial role abroad.

Keywords

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> You see we black people know that racism is the first manifestation
> of fascism – we've been telling you this for a long time.
>> AMBALAVANER SIVANANDAN[1]

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Alberto Toscano, drawing on Cedric Robinson, has identified a distinctive approach to fascism within the Black radical tradition. Toscano highlights how thinkers from W.E.B. Du Bois to Angela Davis 'sought to expand the historical and political imagination of an anti-fascist left' by emphasising fascism's continuities with 'the history of colonial dispossession and racial slavery'.[2] Unlike the new historiography of anti-fascism in North America, however, Black radical perspectives in the British context have often been overlooked.[3] Michael Higgs identifies that while far-right violence in postwar Britain was concentrated against African-Caribbean and Asian immigrants, prevailing accounts situate the organised response to the National Front (NF) in the lineage of inter-war anti-fascism and 'orthodox class struggle'. They have neglected 'the way that Britain's anti-fascist tradition was changed by the black resistance to racism'.[4]

More recently, historian Liam Liburd has usefully deployed an analytical framework of 'thinking Black' about British fascism, foregrounding insights from theorists such as Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall.[5] While seconding Liburd's argument for incorporating critical Black thinkers into fascism studies, this article charts the development of a postwar British Black anti-fascism 'from below'. Whereas the labour-movement mainstream interpreted the NF as an aberrant threat to Britain's social democracy, Black political groups traced fascism's re-emergence from 1967 to the racial violence of the British state – including under the Labour governments of Harold Wilson and Jim Callaghan (1964–70 and 1974–9), which preceded Thatcherism. By addressing heightened racial oppression during a critical early phase in the transition to neoliberalism, Britain's Black Power movement of the 1960s–70s prefigured Hall's influential analysis of 'authoritarian populism'. The article argues that conflicting

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1 Sivanandan 1978a, p. 5.
2 Toscano 2020.
3 Mullen and Vials 2020.
4 Higgs 2016, p. 67.
5 Liburd and Jackson 2021, p. 332.

approaches to the problem of postwar fascism among British leftists and Black radicals reflected divergent perspectives on wider questions of race, class, and imperialism in the era of decolonisation.

Tensions between orthodox-Marxist and Black radical responses to the National Front came to a head with the launching of what remains a central reference point for anti-fascists: the Anti-Nazi League (ANL), initiated by the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in 1977.[6] David Renton, a prominent Marxist scholar of fascism who authored a semi-official history of the ANL in 2006, has since reflected that he had absorbed the SWP narrative 'in which the Anti-Nazi League was the most important part of the anti-fascist coalition', and particularly downplayed the role of 'black Marxists from groups like *Race Today*'.[7]

The most widely-referenced criticism of the ANL's racial politics is that provided by cultural theorist Paul Gilroy, whose interrogation of the League's patriotic anti-Nazi framework was written off by the SWP's Alex Callinicos as the work of a 'black nationalist'.[8] As this article will show, Gilroy's scholarly critique derived from a grassroots Black political movement that took issue with the ANL's singular focus on the NF, which the League portrayed as a revived Hitlerite peril. For Black radicals, the larger strategic problem was the populist racism, inflected by imperial nostalgia, that would help propel Thatcher's New Right to power. The SWP's approach of courting 'anti-Nazi' alliances with governing Labour politicians was at variance with Black radicals' emphasis on the state violence of racist immigration laws and police harassment. British Black Power groups also drew attention to the League's perceived failure to confront NF support amongst white trade unionists. They argued that colonialism's imprint on social democracy had generated deep obstacles to anti-racist solidarities, which needed to be confronted by the left.

This article further looks at how Britain's Black Power movement posed an intellectual counter to the anti-fascist mainstream, which it criticised for dissociating fascism from the colonialist foundations of the 'democratic' West. Understanding the contemporary far-right in Britain required looking beyond narrow Nazi analogies. British Black radicals adapted the Black Panther Party's framing of the settler-colonial US state as itself fascistic, while also echoing earlier metropolitan anti-imperialists like C.L.R. James who compared

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6   In 2018, prominent Labour-left MP John McDonnell and founding ANL member Paul Holborow called for a revived 'Anti-Nazi League-type' campaign to resist the rise of far-right politics. Sabbagh 2018.

7   Renton 2020.

8   Gilroy 2002, pp. 146–77; Callinicos 1992.

Italo-German fascism with the racial horrors of the British Empire. Periodicals such as *Race Today*, *Race & Class* and *The Black Liberator* related the re-emergence of white nationalism to not only the British state's oppression of Black and Asian immigrants, but also its neo-colonial role abroad, including its ongoing links with apartheid South Africa. Their assessment was shared by a significant minority of far-left groups and activists who confronted the government's repressive role in relation to struggles in Vietnam, southern Africa, and Ireland.

Foregrounding Black political challenges to the ANL is not to dismiss its achievement as the largest extra-parliamentary mobilisation in Britain since the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign.[9] Even *Race Today*'s Darcus Howe, a former member of the British Black Panthers and staunch contemporary critic of the ANL, later stated that his youngest child was able to grow up 'black in ease' thanks to the impact of the League, and the preceding Rock Against Racism (RAR) campaign.[10] Localised anti-fascist cultures of resistance forged during the 1970s have enduring legacies today in Southall, Tower Hamlets, Bradford and elsewhere.[11]

Nonetheless, David Roediger has rightly warned that an 'enervating desire for solidarity to be easy' among left-leaning historians can lead to a flattening of the difficulties and contradictions involved in constructing progressive multiracial coalitions.[12] As Stuart Schrader notes in his survey of scholarship on RAR and the ANL, '[r]econstruction of left-wing strategic decisions is painstaking historical work, and criticism of political strategy for the purpose of refining it is important.'[13] Rethinking the priorities of anti-fascism remains necessary in our present era of intensifying state racism and resurgent far-right hostility toward migrants and racialised minorities.

Black Power and White Reaction

After the Second World War, immigrant workers were recruited from the decolonising Empire to assist in Britain's economic reconstruction, only to be greeted with the segregationist 'colour bar' in employment and housing allocation. Racist hostility intensified with the waning of the postwar economic boom, and in 1968 the recently-formed National Front was given a fillip when

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9   Copsey 2000, p. 115.
10   Foot 1992, p. 122.
11   Nijjar 2019.
12   Roediger 2016, p. 240.
13   Schrader 2020, p. 139.

Conservative MP Enoch Powell advocated the repatriation of 'New Commonwealth' immigrants in his infamous 'Rivers of Blood' speech. This had been preceded by the Labour government's rapid imposition of immigration restrictions barring Kenyan Asian refugees.[14] In the 1950s and early 1960s, the British Communist Party (CPGB) had taken a lead in organising trade-union opposition to the colour bar. However, the party's anti-racist stance was increasingly compromised by its allegiance to Labour, and its approach of tackling racism through official state channels – for instance, calling for the strengthening of the Race Relations Act, which had been used to prosecute Black activists advocating militant self-defence measures.[15]

Disillusionment with Labour, the Communist Party, and the assimilationist race-relations industry caused a generation of immigrant radicals to turn to the assertion of Black political power. Black Power in Britain took a specific trajectory, owing to the intertwined legacy of British colonialism in the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia. The inclusive concept of 'political Blackness' developed as a response to shared experiences of racial oppression, and most of the Black Power groups established in Britain, including the Black Panther Movement, contained Asian members. Black Power was also advocated by Jagmohan Joshi, the Maoist leader of the formidable Indian Workers Association (IWA) in Birmingham. In 1965, the IWA invited Malcolm X to visit the South Asian community in Smethwick, where another Tory MP had run an openly racist campaign the previous year. Malcolm told the British press he had learned that 'Blacks' in Smethwick were being 'treated like Negroes in Alabama – like Hitler treated the Jews'.[16] After Powell's inflammatory diatribe, Joshi convened an umbrella Black People's Alliance, advocating defensive action against emboldened fascists, the repeal of racist immigration laws, and an end to the colour bar, which was analogised to apartheid.[17]

British Black Power also championed anti-imperialist causes taken up by the wider radical left. The late 1960s saw the emergence of student protests targeting the government's support for the Vietnam War, and ongoing links with South Africa and Rhodesia. In the same year the NF was formed in 1967, the Universal Coloured People's Association (Britain's earliest Black Power group) highlighted British social democracy's complicity in white supremacism, declaring that 'the only difference between the Ian Smiths and Harold Wilsons of the white world is ... a quarrel between frankness and hypocrisy within a

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14   Virdee 2014, pp. 112–13.
15   Smith 2017, p. 71.
16   Narayan and Andrews 2015.
17   Hirsch 2018, pp. 53, 64.

fascist framework.'[18] An additional anti-imperialist vector during this period was the re-emergence of Irish republicanism, interpreted by the Black Power movement as a neighbouring struggle against British colonial occupation.[19] Like Rhodesia, Northern Ireland was of special interest to the British far-right: Powell was a vocal Unionist, and the National Front developed ties with the paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force.[20]

New alliances between Black radicals and anti-imperialists were evident in the organised response to a spate of fascist attacks on Asian properties in East London, where white dockworkers and meatpackers had struck in support of Powell. After the racist murder of Tosir Ali on 6 April 1970 there arose 'a network of Black Power groups, anti-imperialists and socialists' led by the Pakistani Progressive Party and the Pakistani Workers' Union, in alliance with Maoists in the Irish National Liberation Solidarity Front.[21] In the same year, joint protests against immigration laws and imperialism were organised by the British Black Panthers and the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, which had been initiated by the Guevarist-Trotskyist International Marxist Group (IMG). When these protests led to arrests of Black activists, the IMG co-formed the Black Defence Committee in 1970 as 'a militant group to counter racist and fascist activities'.[22] Another organisation that took a proactive anti-fascist stance was the International Socialist Group (ISG), the forerunner of the SWP, which was prominently involved in shopfloor struggles during the late 1960s and early 1970s and in the opposition to Powellism.

Notwithstanding the extent of violence against Black and Asian communities, serious concern about the far-right only materialised within the wider labour movement in 1974, when a counterdemonstration against an NF 'Send Them Back' march in London's Red Lion Square involving the IMG resulted in the killing of anti-fascist student Kevin Gately in a clash with police. The Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) subsequently issued an anti-fascist pamphlet exhorting trade unionists to combat racism, but the general secretary's foreword made 'no mention of Britain's black population' and contained 'no acknowledgement of the problem of racism as something distinct from, though connected to, fascism', instead presenting the NF as a modern version of Nazism. Nevertheless, over the next several years there continued to develop an 'informal and locally-based network of antifascist/

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18   Higgs 2016, pp. 78–9.
19   Narayan 2019, p. 955.
20   Renton 2019, p. 40.
21   Ashe, Virdee and Brown 2016, pp. 34–41.
22   Waters 2019, p. 117.

anti-racist committees' encompassing elements from the Labour movement and Communist Party, Trotskyists, anti-imperialists, and Black radicals.[23]

However, tensions between Black radicals and white Marxists remained present, which are glossed over or downplayed in conventional accounts. Satnam Virdee's influential thesis that the 1970s witnessed a novel convergence of anti-racist and class-based struggles in Britain, with socialists playing a 'mediating role in politically re-aligning the class struggles against exploitation to those on-going struggles against exploitation enveloped in racism by the black and Asian population', holds much merit. Nevertheless, his argument that the catalysing factor was British Trotskyism taking up the mantle of 'socialist internationalism' from the 'Stalinized' CPGB is an oversimplification.[24] As Roediger points out, when it came to tackling racism specifically, 'the revolutionary left unsullied by Stalinism' was not 'structurally' in an automatically better position.[25] Former International Socialist Group member Martin Shaw's assessment that the group's anti-racist work 'was very much a propaganda drive aimed at recruitment' was shared by many Black and Asian activists.[26]

In April 1976, during a 600-strong NF march through Bradford, the larger anti-fascist camp was divided 'with a predominantly white demonstration marching into the city centre, while most black activists insisted on protecting Manningham', the heart of the South Asian community. Marsha Singh of the Trotskyist Militant Tendency was angered when most of the white socialists were happy to leave Manningham for the city centre: 'I just thought it was a betrayal of everything they were supposed to have taught me.' Tariq Mehmood, then an ISG member, likewise became convinced of the need for 'Black' self-defence: 'Manningham was ours and we had to protect it.' Singh and Mehmood both subsequently abandoned Trotskyism, and became leading figures in the Black Power-inflected Asian Youth Movement.[27]

Racial Fascism Comes to Britain

British Black radicals' divergent organising strategy was accompanied by an intellectual counter to the anti-fascist mainstream, which drew on prior traditions of anti-imperialist, pan-African, and Black Marxist anti-fascisms.

23   Gilroy 2002, pp. 153–4.
24   Virdee 2014, pp. 124, 118–19.
25   Roediger 2015, p. 2235.
26   Shaw 1978, p. 130.
27   Renton 2019, p. 41; Ramamurthy 2013, pp. 25–38.

Fascism's ethno-nationalist violence appears less of an aberration when contextualised in the continuum of European colonialism and slavery, which is the basis of what Cedric Robinson, an associate of *Race & Class*, called a 'Black signification of fascism' opposed to the 'historical manufacture of fascism as a negation of Western *Geist*'.[28] Aimé Césaire's exposure of the hypocrisy latent in 'civilised' Europe's outrage at Nazism had been anticipated in the 1920s and '30s by Marxist anti-imperialists like Rajani Palme Dutt, C.L.R. James, and George Padmore, who decried Britain's 'colonial fascism'.[29] Shortly after the Second World War, in 1948, the Black American communist Harry Haywood's *Negro Liberation* countered anti-fascist triumphalism by identifying a 'native fascism' on 'democratic' US soil, expressed in the horrors of slavery and its afterlives.[30] The same year, the London-based India League published *South Africa: On the Road to Fascism*, condemning the West's enabling of a state whose 'graph of racial laws has risen rapidly to a number far beyond that of Nazi Germany'.[31]

While the domestic imprint of a settler-colonial society was absent in Britain, the tendency for colonialist violence to manifest within the metropole was underscored in *Race Today*, which proclaimed: 'Handsworth, Notting Hill, Brixton, Southall are colonies and the struggles which emerge from within these enclaves are clearly anti-colonial in content.'[32] Continuities between inter-war anti-colonialism and postwar Black Power were reflected in the role of C.L.R. James, who was a primary influence on the *Race Today* Collective, and the uncle of Darcus Howe.[33]

Another formative influence on the British Black Power movement were the writings of the prisoner-revolutionary and Black Panther martyr George Jackson.[34] In dialogue with the US New Left, Jackson articulated an updated anti-fascism that took its bearings 'not from analogies with the European inter-war scene, but instead from the materiality of the prison-industrial complex, from the "concrete and steel", from the devices and personnel of surveillance and repression.'[35] Jackson's description of 'fascist' state repression in America could be organically related to local conditions. As one West Indian resident in

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28   Robinson 2019, pp. 149–52.

29   Buchanan 2016.

30   Haywood 1948, pp. 121, 140.

31   Dadoo and Jadwat 1948, p. 7.

32   *Race Today* Collective 1976, p. 27.

33   Bunce and Field 2011.

34   Waters 2019, pp. 55–6. The campaign in support of Jackson and the other Soledad Brothers in 1971 'brought together black political London at a key moment of international Black Power politics'. Waters 2019, p. 79.

35   Toscano 2020.

Handsworth, Birmingham, declared in 1969: 'If these fascist pigs were armed with guns, then people would realise just how like America this place really is.'[36] A member of the roots-reggae band Steel Pulse stated in an interview for Rock Against Racism that the 'Babylons' (police) in Handsworth 'are the NF', and when police infiltrated a Black Panther carnival at Brixton's Oval House in August 1970, attendees shouted 'Get out, fascist fuzz!'[37] During the Mangrove Nine trial of Black activists, including Howe, prosecuted for demonstrating against police raids on a Caribbean restaurant, the defendants explained they were picketing 'the three main centres of fascist repression in the area – Notting Hill, Notting Dale and Harrow Road Police Stations'.[38]

Writing in *Race & Class*, Ian Macdonald, the radical white barrister representing one of the Mangrove Nine, stated his agreement with Jackson that 'we are already living under fascism'. Macdonald provocatively argued that 'the young black men and women who swarmed round Caledonian Road police station in 1970' were 'engaged in far more effective anti-fascist activities than the red battalions of Red Lion Square'.[39] In a response article Maurice Ludmer, the editor of the anti-fascist magazine *Searchlight* who later helped kickstart the Anti-Nazi League, derided the conceptual 'confusion' involved in implying that the British state was literally fascist. Ludmer, a former communist and a veteran campaigner against the colour bar in Birmingham with his comrade Joshi, was understandably irked by Macdonald's dismissive attitude to the organised left. Nevertheless, his suggestion that Macdonald and Jackson should look to the experience of workers living under real dictatorships in southern Europe and Chile ignored the rhetorical and analytical utility of invoking fascism to expose the indifference to racial oppression on the part of the 'white left'.[40] As Bill Mullen and Christopher Vials explain, 'while a fascist state and a white supremacist democracy have very different mechanisms of power, the experience of racialized rightlessness within a liberal democracy can make the distinction between it and fascism murky at the level of lived experience.'[41]

British Black radicals particularly foregrounded the seamless feedback loop between germinal fascist formations and the coercive instruments of the state. *Race & Class* editor Ambalavaner Sivanandan, who orchestrated a Black Power 'coup' at the Institute of Race Relations in 1972, stressed the connection between

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36   John 1972, p. 25.
37   Birmingham Rock Against Racism *c.*1976; Angelo 2009, p. 25.
38   Higgs 2016, p. 79.
39   Macdonald 1975, pp. 297, 303.
40   Ludmer 1975, p. 418.
41   Mullen and Vials 2020, p. 270.

the NF's 'racialist outbreaks' and 'the state's long-term strategy of intimidating, repressing and ultimately incorporating the black working class into a structure of domestic neo-colonialism.'[42] That far-right thuggery on the streets fed directly on the respectable racism reproduced by the governing institutions of society was further evidenced by the manufactured 'mugging' scare. During this moral panic, Callaghan's Labour government put the 'sus' stop-and-search law into full force in Britain's inner cities. The policy culminated in the 1976 Notting Hill Carnival 'disturbances', when Black youths confronted an invading Metropolitan Police Force while chanting 'Soweto, Soweto!', in reference to the uprising in South Africa earlier that year.[43] When the Front called for an 'anti-muggers' march through Lewisham on 13 August 1977, 'they were not only targeting an area for its multicultural population, but purposely following where the state and the media had led.'[44]

Anti-Fascist Mythos and the Battle of Lewisham

In preparation for the NF march, a counter-protest of around 4,000 anti-fascists was organised by the All-Lewisham Campaign Against Racism and Fascism. While the Communist Party was opposed to open confrontation with the fascists, the SWP contingent broke through police lines and helped render the NF a humiliating rout.[45] The conflict at Lewisham was the direct inspiration for the launch of the Anti-Nazi League, and Higgs notes the significance that 'the organisation that would later become the *sine qua non* of anti-fascist organising emerged when it did on the back of what was essentially a black protest against the state'. In the preceding months, police had raided homes across south-east London, smashing down doors and arresting dozens of Black men. Anti-racist activists responded by organising the Lewisham 21 Defence Campaign.[46] For the local community, the Battle of Lewisham again underscored the limits of state anti-racism. Despite legislation banning incitement to racial hatred, 'the very instruments of "law and order"' were seen 'merrily escorting a band of racist thugs, crying "w*** out", "n****** go home" and worse, into the heart of a black area, battoning aside all opposition'.[47]

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42   Sivanandan 1976, p. 1.
43   Gilroy 2013, p. 552.
44   Higgs 2016, p. 72.
45   Renton 2019, pp. 77–82.
46   Higgs 2016, p. 75.
47   *Socialist Challenge* 1977, p. 2.

The spontaneous aspect of the Black community's response on 13 August is highlighted by an anecdote from a demonstrator: 'The cry went up from the marchers, "Let's go to Ladywell station", but we [SWP members] meant to go to the train station, to go home. The black youth took it up, "To Ladywell, Ladywell police station" …. They stoned the station.'[48] Darcus Howe of the *Race Today* Collective was there on the day too, 'a Trinidadian giant with a hand megaphone … thoughtfully advising the crowd, rather as a cricket captain might place his field.'[49] Echoing Communist MP Phil Piratin's account of the multi-ethnic proletarian unity witnessed from the barricades at Cable Street, one Lewisham resident described the bonds of solidarity forged on the ground:

> There was a very friendly feeling. At times I saw guys sitting on walls – a really militant black guy sittin' chattin' with a white guy which normally he'd never do. In the crowd they were drawn together.[50]

A pivotal role in synchronising anti-fascism and Black self-defence through the Lewisham Defence Campaign was played by Anthony Bogues and Kim Gordon of the SWP's Black caucus, which published *Flame* – a newspaper that 'sought to connect struggles of black workers in Britain and the Caribbean to ongoing anti-colonial movements in Africa and elsewhere'.[51] Bogues, a Jamaican socialist who is now an eminent scholar of C.L.R. James, recalled that *Flame* developed 'a different style from the British left':

> We didn't leaflet people. We asked what they thought …. I made initial contacts, with the people in *Flame* and also with family, friends …. The International Marxist Group had a guy called Fitzroy, from Nigeria. There was the Black Marxist Collective in Croydon. It was a different kind of politics, based on the immigrant cultures.[52]

Flame celebrated the foray as 'the day that the Black youth gave the police a beating'.[53] Lewisham has a central place in SWP mythology, and it is frequently invoked as evidence of the group's anti-racist credentials. But what is glossed over is the leading role of Black socialists whose autonomous organisation was to be promptly shut down by the party leadership. In the context of wider

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48   Higgs 2016, p. 74.
49   Renton 2019, p. 81.
50   Copsey 2000, p. 60; Big Flame 1978, p. 6.
51   Myers 2022.
52   Renton 2019, p. 72.
53   Smith 2017, p. 187.

centralising impulses within the SWP, leader Tony Cliff initiated moves to shut down the Black caucus in 1978, with accusations concerning its members confusing oppression with exploitation.[54] As Gordon pointed out, the 'underlying assumption behind much of the CC [Central Committee]'s argumentation against Flame is that the struggle against oppression is external to the working class and the workplace.' Cliff and his supporters ignored *Flame*'s successes in linking the fight against state racism with anti-fascist and shop-floor struggles, in addition to building ties with Black women's groups.[55]

Bogues's 'different kind of politics' were to remain marginal. The launching of the ANL in November 1977 dramatically broadened the popular support for anti-fascism, but the initiative largely failed to respond to the questions raised over the previous decade about the relationship between the NF and state racism/imperialism, and the significance of Black political power. There is much evidence to support Sivanandan's lament, that 'the direction of the battle got deflected from a fight against racism and, therefore, fascism to a fight against fascism and, incidentally, racism.'[56]

The Price of Popularity

The SWP had previously chided the Communist Party for entering 'class-collaborationist anti-racialist committees stuffed full of reformist[s]', but the ANL was a similarly broad-church affair, and many of the steering-committee members were Labour MPs.[57] Labour had historically been a very unreliable anti-fascist ally, but it now had a self-interested concern to counteract the NF's electoral gains.[58] The result was that the ANL could appear to be primarily responding to an embarrassment to Britain's parliamentary democracy, rather than the racial terror meted out to Black and Asian people. For West Indian communist Trevor Carter, the League's emphasis on being anti-Nazi, as opposed to anti-racist, 'signalled to us that here again was another white organisation which … had overlooked the perspective, needs and demands of our community.'[59]

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54   Cliff 2000, p. 152.
55   Gordon 1979, p. 34.
56   Sivanandan 1985, p. 9.
57   Higgs 2016, p. 73.
58   Copsey 2005.
59   Carter 1986, p. 118.

Local anti-fascist committees complained that the ANL, 'apart from embracing nationalist overtones itself, has attracted such a wide base of support that racist elements have crept into [its] list of supporters.'[60] Among the League's prominent sponsors was the Southall left-wing Labour MP Sydney Bidwell, who in 1978 signed the Select Committee on Race Relations and Immigration report recommending even tighter restrictions on immigration from the Indian subcontinent. An Indian Workers Association leaflet on the NF could argue with some merit that 'the greater part of the blame must rest here in Britain, as it did in the 30s in Germany, on the failure of social democracy ... to wage any effective struggle against racialism.'[61] Although ANL literature criticised institutional racism and immigration laws, by attaching itself to the parliamentary Labour Party it risked reinforcing the legitimacy of a social democracy complicit in constructing racial categories of belonging and exclusion.[62] This brought a practical dimension to contemporary and posthumous debates about whether the League was sufficiently autonomous of Labour to be considered a revolutionary 'united front'.[63]

Tensions also arose during the ANL music festivals staged in collaboration with the existing Rock Against Racism campaign which, according to Gilroy, had been very successful in winning the support of white youths.[64] However, some anti-racist activists were concerned that in equating 'music with Punk' and 'black identity with Afro-Caribbean', both RAR and the ANL 'neglected the British Asians who were the primary target of the NF on the streets.'[65] At one ANL carnival, an IWA representative 'was greeted by incomprehension when he chose to discuss imperialism and workers' issues rather than the "suffering" of Asians and support of anti-Nazism.'[66]

The dangers of prioritising popular mobilisations over community-oriented resistance were underscored during the two high-profile ANL carnivals in 1978. The day after the first carnival in London, fascists were able to march through the East End unopposed on workers' May Day. An estimated 100,000 people attended the second carnival held in Brixton, but a mile away in Brick Lane, where 25-year-old Altab Ali had been murdered months earlier, the Bangladeshi community was facing down another NF march with minimal

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60   Leamington Anti-Racist, Anti-Fascist Committee 1978, p. 4.
61   Indian Workers' Front 1976. The IWF was the Southall branch of Joshi's IWA(GB).
62   Renton 2019, p. 115.
63   Copsey 2000, pp. 132, 144.
64   Gilroy 2002, pp. 162–3; Gilroy and Lawrence 1988, p. 141.
65   Robinson 2011, p. 114.
66   Kalra, Hutnyk and Sharma 1996, p. 134.

reinforcement from anti-fascists.[67] On both occasions, the ANL organisers had received prior warning of the fascists' plans. In the aftermath of the second carnival, some SWP members criticised the party leadership for being preoccupied with extravagant festivals and courting celebrity MPs, at the expense of a targeted anti-racist strategy.[68] However, rank-and-file calls for the ANL to be democratically restructured fell on deaf ears.

The Black radical rejoinder to the ANL achieved organisational expression in the coalition Black People Against State Harassment (BASH), formed a week after the second carnival by several Black political groups including the Indian Workers Association. BASH overlapped with other networks such as the Campaign Against Racist Laws, and was directed pointedly against state racism – particularly the 1971 'whites-only' Immigration Act, and associated deportations. In June 1979, a month after an anti-racist protest in Southall at which SWP member Blair Peach was killed by a policeman, BASH organised a large demonstration of some 4,000 mostly Asian protestors against the Tories' impending British Nationality Act, during which key organiser Joshi suffered a fatal heart attack.[69] At another mobilisation in November, Labour MP and regular ANL spokesperson Tony Benn was reportedly booed for attempting to defend his party's record on immigration.[70]

A particular strength of BASH (and its successor, Black People Against State Brutality) was its involvement of Black women's groups that drew attention to the gendered nature of state racism, notably the 'virginity testing' of migrant Asian women at Heathrow airport.[71] In a *Spare Rib* article in July 1979, Perminder Dhillon of Southall Black Sisters suggested that immigrant women 'know what police protection means – being beaten with their truncheons, while a few streets away a black sister is sexually assaulted by white youths.' Dhillon further reported how during the June demonstration, in a well-worn pattern, 'the (mostly white) Socialist Workers Party showed complete insensitivity both to racism and sexism by insisting on carrying their own placards, against the request of the women organisers [who were protesting the Heathrow scandal], that mentioned neither black people nor women but just advertised the SWP'.[72]

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67   Higgs 2016, pp. 75–6.
68   Welch and Hearn 1978, p. 31.
69   Ramamurthy 2013, pp. 101–2.
70   Clough 2014, p. 166.
71   Ramamurthy 2013, p. 93.
72   Dhillon 1979, pp. 32–3.

Patriotic Anti-Fascist Teleology

While the need to confront nascent fascism is not in doubt, in justifying the League's singular focus on the National Front and its electoral advances there was perhaps a danger of crying wolf. An SWP pamphlet on the NF authored by Colin Sparks, for instance, argued that it 'is possible for [the Front] to build a mass Nazi party in Britain in the next few years.'[73] Black radicals rather more credibly held that in the context of 1970s Britain, the repressive function of the existing state was a larger strategic problem – not least because this was the actual feeding ground of the neo-fascists. It was thus a tactical miscalculation on the ANL's part to prioritise 'anti-Nazi' alliances with Labour MPs, thereby diminishing the space that previously existed in RAR to challenge the government's racist (and anti-working class) record. Particularly notable was the ANL steering committee's decision to veto a rank-and-file proposal to make opposition to immigration controls a condition of affiliation, since this would directly contradict Labour Party policy.[74]

As Gilroy has emphasised, the central framing of the NF as a revived Nazi threat ('The National Front is a Nazi Front') further entailed a certain manipulation of popular patriotic sentiment. The cry of 'Never Again' and some of the League's propaganda materials implicitly or explicitly conjured the 'genuine nationalist spirit which had been created in Britain's finest hour' during WWII, and exposed the NF as 'inauthentic' patriots. In this way, anti-Nazism brushed over the indigenous origins of British fascism, and suggested there was something 'foreign' about the NF's racism.[75] The limitations of inter-war analogies were also emphasised by the future director of the Institute of Race Relations, Colin Prescod. Writing in *The Black Liberator* – the journal of the Black Unity and Freedom Party – Prescod suggested that 'those Europeans who fear and abhor fascism, and who look back to the 1930's for their fascism, were they to look closely at the Black experience in Britain, would find that they have been looking the wrong way'.[76] This aligns with Alana Lentin's contention that the ANL reinforced 'a teleological view of racism which identifies Hitlerism as the specific form of racism to which British extremists aspire.'[77]

As Powellism brought overt racism into the mainstream, 'the fascist Right began to discard its overtly Nazi tropes, replacing its anti-Semitic conspiracy

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73 Sparks 1978, p. 35.
74 Gilroy 2002, p. 174.
75 Gilroy 2002, pp. 171–8.
76 Prescod 1978, p. 5.
77 Lentin 2004, p. 225.

theory (at least in public, most of the time) with the anti-immigrant mantra.'[78] In an observation that was prescient given the direction of the post-NF far-right, Gilroy and Errol Lawrence pinpointed that: 'However frequently the Nazis are "kicked out", the populist and resilient nature of British racism means that most racist Britons do not recognise themselves as Nazis.'[79] Already in 1974, an International Marxist Group pamphlet observed that while NF leaders posed as 'jack-booted Nazi stormtroopers', which was easy to sensationalise, this was not the image of the wider movement. Rather, 'many people are taken by surprise by its "Britishness"', and 'many workers who hate "fascism" find that the policies of the Front correspond rather closely with many of their own prejudices.'[80]

The anti-Nazi paradigm neglected a native fascist tradition that had its genesis in the wellspring of imperial racism.[81] After WWII, the British far-right coalesced around opposition to decolonisation: A.K. Chesterton's League of Empire Loyalists was the 'conveyor belt' through which all the major names of the NF passed. The early NF was also sponsored by disgruntled Tory imperialists and Ulster Unionists in the pro-apartheid Monday Club. As Evan Smith shows, the Front envisioned the British Commonwealth 'reconstituted as an expression of white supremacist solidarity – particularly as South Africa and Rhodesia were deemed to be on the frontline of a battle between multiracialist communism and "white civilisation" in this period of the Cold War.'[82]

As Gilroy argued, the perils of populism in a declining imperial power were often lost on the ANL's parliamentary-left backers including Tony Benn, whose Alternative Economic Strategy was frequently framed in terms of a socialist patriotism.[83] Labour was also ill-placed to take the moral high ground on apartheid given that it continued to trade with South Africa, a source of immense mining profits for Britain. The ANL did have a link to anti-apartheid activism through the prominent role of Peter Hain, a leading figure in the British Anti-Apartheid Movement. However, this campaign, like the ANL, largely excluded Black radical perspectives and was 'constrained to what was acceptable to the official trade unions and Labour Party'.[84]

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78   Higgs 2016, p. 69.
79   Gilroy and Lawrence 1988, p. 150.
80   International Marxist Group 1974, p. 13.
81   Liburd 2018.
82   Smith 2018, pp. 75, 70.
83   Gilroy 2002, p. 62.
84   Higginbottom 2016, p. 555.

Certainly, there was some organic correspondence between pre-1945 anti-fascism and postwar movements against racism and imperialism. Sean Hosey, an Irish Londoner in the Young Communist League who undertook covert activities for the ANC-SACP, spoke for many of his generation when he referred to 'a thread that ran through my upbringing, Spain, the Second World War, American Civil Rights, Vietnam and of course South Africa'.[85] As Virdee suggests, Gilroy tends to caricature the ANL as operating within a 'hermetically sealed box' that prevented ideas about racism and capitalism 'leaking' into its anti-fascism.[86] In reality, the need to connect anti-fascism with broader struggles against white supremacy was taken up by many activists within the ANL's orbit. However, these connections were only *systematically* advanced by a minority of anti-imperialist inclined groups. These included the IMG, the Revolutionary Communist Group (a splinter from the SWP), and the libertarian-socialist Big Flame. The latter, sometimes described as a 'soft Maoist' group, was loosely associated with Gilroy and the Centre for Contemporary Culture Studies, and in 1978 it published *A Close Look at Fascism and Racism*, which contained an interview with Sivanandan.[87] A follow-up pamphlet two years later situated British fascism within the context of empire, the white Commonwealth, and Irish occupation, while tracing the NF's patriarchal politics to the imperial ideology of racial hygiene. It concluded by calling for combined anti-fascist and anti-imperialist solidarities, pointing out how the overthrow of the Salazar dictatorship in 1974 was 'prompted by the defeat of Portuguese imperialism in Angola and Mozambique' – the prelude to the final victory over apartheid.[88]

The unifying thread in Black radical and anti-imperialist criticisms of the ANL was that it isolated outgrowths of far-right extremism from underlying capitalist and colonialist structures of domination. As Olive Morris of the Brixton Black Women's Group (an affiliate of BASH) emphasised, it was 'not enough to like reggae and jump around the streets wearing badges'. Fascism had to be tackled at its systemic roots: 'institutional racism, the police force, the education system, the trade unions and imperialism'.[89]

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85   Hyslop 2020, p. 77.
86   Virdee 2014, p. 140.
87   Big Flame 1978.
88   Big Flame 1980, p. 30.
89   Narayan 2019, p. 965, n. 46.

White Labourism, Proletarian Fascism?

The fascist penetration of the labour movement was another overlooked weak spot of the ANL. While working-class fascists were certainly 'a minority compared to the multitudes of trade unionist anti-fascists', NF membership was nevertheless disproportionately comprised of 'skilled' manual workers.[90] Despite this, the SWP officially upheld the orthodox Trotskyist framing of fascism as 'a specific means of mobilising and organising the petty bourgeoisie in the social interests of finance capital', downplaying white working-class agency within contemporary far-right formations.[91] Sparks somewhat crudely separated 'petit-bourgeois fascism' from 'proletarian racialism': the latter was argued to exist in tension with the 'real experience of class'.[92]

Working-class susceptibility to fascism had been apparent in the composition of Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists (BUF) in the 1930s. The BUF garnered support not only from Lord Rothermere and the colonial-officer class, but also a minority of the unemployed and trade unionists disillusioned with the Labour Party, as reflected in the creation of the Fascist Union of British Workers.[93] Renton's assertion that trade unions' 'underlying principles of solidarity were inimical to the tradition of radical inequality on which fascism was based' rather neglects the counter-pulls of white racial solidarity and social-imperialism.[94] In the early twentieth century, labour movements across the white Commonwealth and within the imperial metropole inculcated a shared ideology of racial solidarity, which historian Jonathon Hyslop has termed 'White Labourism'.[95] After the First World War, the scapegoating of colonial maritime workers for unemployment by white trade-union officials encouraged murderous 'race riots' in several British port towns.[96] The Mosleyites capitalised on such racial chauvinism with literature accusing the Communist Party of putting the interests of 'foreigners' before the imperial working class, and the by-line of the BUF's *Blackshirt* became 'the patriotic workers' paper'.[97] Mosley's 'socialistic imperialism' was also initially supported by prominent Labour-left MPs, including Aneurin Bevan.[98]

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90   Renton 2005, p. 142.
91   Renton 1999, p. 72.
92   Sparks 1979.
93   Coupland 2005, pp. 42–3.
94   Renton 2005, p. 142.
95   Hyslop 1999.
96   Virdee 2014, pp. 79–83.
97   Coupland 2005, p. 58.
98   Coupland 2005, p. 40.

White labour's prolonged entanglement with imperialism was noted by Britain's Black Power movement, which as John Narayan shows posited 'a direct link between the formation of British social democracy, super-exploitation in the Third World and ideas of white nationalism in the UK.'[99] In contrast, more-orthodox Marxist theorists in the SWP viewed instances of working-class racism as *simply* an ideological product of capitalist divide-and-rule trickery. Nigel Harris, also on the ANL steering committee, claimed Britain's use of Black labour meant there could be no 'structured' racism; rather, it operated solely 'on a personal and cultural level'.[100] Rather more convincingly, Big Flame argued that while 'no other class but the working class is capable of reconciling its own class interests with an anti-imperialist struggle', this did not negate the 'material reasons for the racialism of white workers towards black immigrants'.[101] It was, for instance, racialised norms of entitlement and exclusion in employment and housing that underlay the anti-Black riots of 1958, which Hall identified as 'the appearance, for the first time in real terms since the 1940s, of an active fascist political element' in Britain.[102]

In the trade unions themselves, racial exclusionism meshed with ingrained habits of craft sectionalism. After WWII, 'skilled' white workers in core industries often enforced a quota system restricting 'Black' labour to five per cent of employees.[103] Shirin Hirsch notes how Powell's rhetoric was 'carefully directed towards a newly constructed white working-class identity in association with employers, both reflecting and creating new divisions within the British workforce.'[104] Working-class support for Powell in turn 'impressed on the National Front that racism could be a potentially powerful force in the trade unions'.[105] When South Asian workers in textile mills and metal foundries took industrial action with IWA support against the racist wage hierarchy, and such humiliating practices as segregated toilets, the NF intervened by organising white strike-breakers. During the April 1970 council elections, one of the NF's two Wolverhampton candidates was an Amalgamated Union of Engineering and Foundry Workers member, and the other a TGWU shop steward.[106]

The Front's fastest area of growth was Leicestershire, where some of its candidates achieved over a quarter of the vote in local elections on the back

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99   Narayan 2019, p. 956.
100   Harris 1975, p. 23.
101   Big Flame 1980, p. 18.
102   Hall 2017, p. 147.
103   Virdee 2014, p. 102.
104   Hirsch 2018, p. 22.
105   Copsey 2000, pp. 117–18.
106   Husbands 1983, pp. 68–9.

of popular hostility to Ugandan Asian refugees.[107] Asian and Black militants in the area, along with Trotskyist and communist allies, took up a protracted struggle against fascism and the industrial colour bar. The new alliances culminated in several landmark anti-racist trade union conferences in 1973, securing official Trades Union Congress recognition for the first time that unions should 'actively oppose racialism within their own ranks'.[108]

However, the dangers of assuming a simple correspondence between antifascism and anti-racism remained. In August 1974, the fascists organised a protest in Leicester in support of white scabs during the prominent Imperial Typewriters dispute, one of whom stood as an NF candidate in the October general election. The International Socialist Group's main involvement at Imperial was in an anti-fascist demonstration on 24 August. *Race Today* published a letter by the Imperial Typewriters Strike Committee, arguing that the International Socialists' intervention was a counterproductive 'recruiting campaign' which concentrated on 'smashing the fascism of the NF', rather than giving 'support [to] Black workers in their struggle for democratic rights'.[109]

Existing accounts of anti-NF activity have missed the significance of Black and Asian workers' self-organisation in pushing back against reactionary white solidarity, which was complementary to the organised street presence against fascist marches. The struggles at Mansfield and Imperial, along with national strikes involving African-Caribbean porters and nurses, challenged racist (and gendered) assumptions about immigrant workers' passivity. *Race Today* noted that a 'new element' had emerged among the Imperial strikers: 'young, longhaired, golden-earringed, bedenimed and brown-skinned …. They have no qualms about attacking the National Front [and] cheeking the police.'[110]

The Anti-Nazi League encouraged the formation of local anti-fascist workers' groups, but it missed an opportunity to champion Black radicals' strategic push for self-organisation within the labour movement. From 1974, the National Front continued to target workers alienated by Labour's imposition of wage controls during an inflationary boom.[111] According to the IMG, an ANL trade-union conference in November 1978 'failed to grapple with the political debates which are being raised by anti-Nazi activity in the trade unions'.[112] The League's antipathy to Black political organising was related to a superficial

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107   Asher 1976, pp. 16–19.
108   Virdee 2014, p. 129.
109   Khetani 1974, p. 287.
110   Sen 1974, p. 202.
111   Smith 2018, p. 76.
112   Talbot 1978, p. 6.

equation of Black Power with Black 'separatism' by leading SWP theorists such as Cliff and Harris.[113] Indeed, ANL organising secretary Paul Holborow still reduces the divergent anti-fascist approaches to a dichotomy 'between the black nationalists and people who argue for black and white unity'.[114] However, in practice most Black radicals advocated strategic autonomy, not racial separatism.[115]

By connecting racial populism to neoliberal capitalist renewal, Britain's Black Power movement revived the strategic universalism articulated within what Robbie Shilliam calls 'the tradition of anti-colonial anti-fascism' in 1930s London.[116] The British Black Panthers exhorted white workers to recognise how racialised oppression was central to 'the reconstitution of class domination in the midst of the crisis of global capitalism'.[117] Hall's influential analysis of the function of racism in 'discipling the nation to consent' in *Policing the Crisis* (1978), co-authored with colleagues at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, drew heavily from *Race Today* and *The Black Liberator*.[118] Writing in the latter on the eve of Thatcher's war on labour, Prescod noted how the paramilitary Special Patrol Group, which the 'white left' paid little heed to when it was used against Black people at Lewisham and elsewhere, was now being used 'as the shock troops of the state in industrial actions'. Prescod warned that so long as white workers opted to focus on their narrow and relative 'privileges', they would 'suffer in the long run as much as the Black sector of the working class.'[119]

As Sivanandan concluded, that the ANL was a movement against sub-state fascism, and only 'incidentally against racism', meant that when Thatcher's New Right 'moved in and stole the National Front's clothes, the ANL was denuded of its purpose'.[120] The League was wound down in the winter of 1981–2, at a time of ascendant racial populism under a Prime Minister who had warned of Britain being 'swamped' by immigrants.

113   Harris 1975, pp. 23–4; Callinicos 1992.
114   Holborow 2019.
115   Narayan 2019; Bunce and Field 2011.
116   Shilliam 2016, p. 33
117   Narayan 2019, p. 957.
118   Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke and Roberts 1978.
119   Prescod 1978, p. 7.
120   Sivanandan 1980, p. 296.

Conclusion

For Black Britain, Kobena Mercer tells us, 'the 1980s were lived as a relentless vertigo of displacement'.[121] Police harassment combined with high levels of youth unemployment provoked a series of inner-city insurrections in the summer of 1981. Racist attacks were unrelenting, and had reached a rate of 15,000 a year.[122] State repression under Thatcher was accompanied by a concerted 'disaggregation' of Black political power, when in the aftermath of the urban uprisings the government began to sponsor a new buffer class of 'ethnic representatives'.[123] More generally, the decline of Black Power corresponded with setbacks for anti-systemic forces globally in the last decade of the Cold War.

While the NF's street and electoral presence had been diminished, Sivanandan observed that the fascists had been driven 'in to the crevices and ratholes of the inner cities in which they breed – where they then resort to vicious and violent attacks on the black community'.[124] Into the 1990s, the British National Party (BNP) gained considerable support in the de-industrialised north-west of England, where it could capitalise on New Labour's demonising of migrants and asylum-seekers. The ANL had been relaunched on a reduced scale in 1992, but the utility of anti-Nazi propaganda was again called into question when Burnley's three elected BNP councillors could declare ten years later: 'We're just normal people.'[125]

Today, it remains the case that the immediate threat is not a rerun of 1920s/'30s-style mass fascist movements, which were products of a historical conjuncture of inter-imperialist war, economic turmoil, and Europe-wide counterrevolution. Vis-à-vis Jackson and the US New Left, Hall was rightly careful to distinguish between 'true' fascism and the unexceptional racial authoritarianism of a beleaguered bourgeois-democratic state.[126] Like Jackson, though, Hall viewed fascism as a process, with sub-state fascist elements like the NF feeding on state-driven racial populism, and vice versa. Social discontent in the neoliberal era continues to be met with intensifying racial authoritarianism from above, including the hardening of borders in response to refugee crises caused by successive imperialist invasions in West Asia. Within Britain, political elites have effectively manipulated the colonial nostalgia that surrounded

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121   Mercer 1994, p. 2.
122   Renton 2019, p. 162.
123   Sivanandan 1985.
124   Sivanandan 1978b, p. 3.
125   Copsey 2005, p. 192.
126   Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke and Roberts 1978, p. 303.

the Brexit campaign, with government officials referring to 'Empire 2.0'.[127] Resurgent far-right movements have existed in a symbiotic relationship with such developments.

For the left, this should underscore the dangers of the social-democratic nativism which still characterised elements of the 2015–19 Labour-left revival when it came to issues of immigration, policing, and 'national security'.[128] Complacent assumptions about trade-union immunity to racism are also belied by the internalisation of elite-driven narratives about the 'white working class' being singularly 'left behind'.[129] The organised left missed an opportunity to advance what Barnaby Raine referred to as 'a genuinely anti-establishment insurgency, pitted both against the EU and the nativist, anti-migrant miseries that the EU and the British Right breed'.[130]

As in the 1970s, heightened carceral powers targeting racialised minorities have also facilitated a generalised offensive against workers and the left. The racially-charged language of crime, security, and public order has helped to propel legislation that will enhance law enforcers' ability to penalise protestors and workplace organisers. With the defeat of Corbynism, Labour has hastened to demonstrate its commitment to 'law and order', and to suppressing criticism of NATO militarism and Britain's support for Israeli apartheid.[131] The present authoritarian-populist conjuncture calls for solidarities among diverse segments of the working class, but deep fissures remain to be overcome. Important historical lessons therefore remain to be drawn from the role of Black radicals and anti-imperialists in broadening the liberatory horizons of socialism and anti-fascism in the 1970s.

There can be no quick victories against the far-right, and the dominant paradigm of bureaucratic anti-fascist fronts headed by trade-union officials and Labour MPs has questionable strategic utility. In addition to clearing newer fascist formations like Patriotic Alternative off the streets, the left needs to return to the unfinished business of confronting 'the totality of state racism'.[132] Sivanandan's entreaty for a combined anti-fascist and anti-racist struggle, sealed with a nod to James Baldwin, is still poignant:

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127   Koram and Nişancıoğlu 2017.
128   Narayan 2019.
129   Ashe 2019.
130   Raine 2019.
131   Eagleton 2021.
132   Nagdee and Shafi 2020.

[Fascism] affects white and black people alike .... The fight against fascism is a fight that is common to both of us, we come at it from two different directions, two different perspectives. We are the immediate victims. If they come for us in the morning, they will come for you that night. So be with us that morning and we will be with you that night.[133]

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133   Sivanandan 1978a, p. 5.

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