

BLOOD ON THE STREETS

For Bengalis in London's East End in the 1970s "Paki bashing" was a common experience. White racists, often whipped up by the National Front and other far-right groups, gave racism a very real and frightening presence in the area.

However, the Bengali community did have anti-racist allies, most notably among organised workers in the trade union movement. In 1978 Bethnal Green and Stepney Trades Council produced a publication called *Blood on the Streets*, outlining the racist climate that existed in the East End at the time.

Blood on the Streets numbered a hefty 100 pages putting the then current situation into context by examining the role of the National Front and other racist groups and their history of activity in the area.

The East End had been a breeding ground for extreme right wing political activity since the turn of the 20th Century. In the early 1900s the British Brothers League championed by the Conservative MP for Stepney, Major William Evans-Gordon, mounted a virulent campaign against Jewish immigrants in East London

that led to the first immigration legislation, The Aliens Act of 1905. Numerous proto-fascist and then fascist organisations were to follow, the most notorious being Sir Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists in the 1930s. Mosley and the British Union of Fascists had thousands of supporters who blamed Jews for high unemployment and social evils in the area. Violent attacks took place against Jews although the anti-fascist movement fought back, most famously at the Battle of Cable Street in October 1936 when the fascists were prevented from marching through the East End's Jewish districts.

Unrepentant, even after the crimes of fascism in Europe were revealed after the Second World War, the fascists continued their activities. With the passage of time the organisations splintered and took on new names. The most well known group in the 1970s were the National Front (NF) but there

were also smaller organisations such as the notoriously violent British Movement, Column 88, and the shadowy umbrella organisation, the League of St George.

In the 1974 General Election the NF stood in the Bethnal Green and Bow parliamentary constituency and polled 7% of the vote – over 2000 votes.

In the 1977 Greater London Council elections NF candidates polled over 19% of the vote in Bethnal Green and Bow. In Hackney South and Shoreditch the NF polled 9.4% of the vote.

In the 1978 local council elections – the evening of Altab Ali's murder – the NF fielded 41 candidates gaining 9.4% of the vote and collecting a total of 7,000 votes in Tower Hamlets. It was a significant vote for a fascist party but it wasn't the landslide that they had expected. It was to herald a new wave of violence.

While attacks on Bengalis, and other visible minorities, was commonplace the fascists also singled out white anti-



DAN JONES REFLECTS

IN 1983 THE TOWER HAMLETS ARTS PROJECT (THAP) PUBLISHED A BOOKLET CALLED AUSCHWITZ AND EAST LONDON WHICH SUPPORTED AN EXHIBITION MOUNTED LOCALLY WHICH MADE LINKS BETWEEN EXPERIENCES OF RACISM PAST AND PRESENT. IN THIS BOOKLET, DAN JONES, AT THAT TIME A YOUTH WORKER AND SECRETARY OF THE TOWER HAMLETS TRADES COUNCIL, REFLECTED ON THE 1970S AND THE BATTLES THAT HAD BEEN FOUGHT AGAINST THE RACISTS IN THE EAST END.

"I find it difficult to write about the late 1970s in the East End. My memories are full of death, marches and funeral processions.

I walked behind the coffin of Altab Ali, a young clothing worker from Wapping, who was stabbed to death in Whitechapel. I remember the massive outburst of grief and the dignified defiance by Bengali workers that followed his murder. I remember the murders of Ishaq Ali and Michael Ferreira in Hackney, the deaths of Kenneth Singh of Newham and of the Khan family in Walthamstow. My friend Blair Peach, a member of the Trades Council and teacher of handicapped children at Phoenix School in Bow, died at the hands of the police in the Southall disturbances. Ten thousand of us, black and white, Sikh, Muslim, Christian and Jew gathered in the bleak East London cemetery for his burial.

There were times in the late '70s when thousands of Sylheti (Bengali) workers from the factories, sweatshops and restaurants of the East End took to the streets in massive marches and protests demanding an end to racist incitement and attacks. The Trades Council published its indictment of racialism, *Blood on the Streets*. Protests remained peaceful and multi-racial despite continued provocation and a deadening lack of response from the authorities. A new generation of young cockney Bengalis was emerging, no longer prepared to cower in fear or to accept discriminatory treatment – a movement that has begun to make a fundamental political and social impact on our area.

The Asian community continues to demand fair treatment in housing, employment and civil liberty, and

BRICK LANE, 1978. © PAUL TREVOR



racists for attack. Labour Party workers were beaten and numerous premises of left wing organisations suffered arson attacks. Some people came under attacks in their own homes.

On one of the worst occasions of fascist violence, 11 June 1978, 150 white youths ran down Brick Lane shouting "kill the black bastards", smashing the windows of a dozen shops and car windscreens of Bengali shopkeepers. One shopkeeper, Abdul Monan, was knocked unconscious by a hail of rocks and stones hurled through his shop window. He lost two teeth in the attack and needed five stitches to his face.

In that attack some local Bengalis and anti-racists fought off the racists and managed to hold 20 of the white youths for 10 minutes until the police arrived. However, the police released all but three of the youths who were eventually only charged with the minor offence of threatening behaviour.

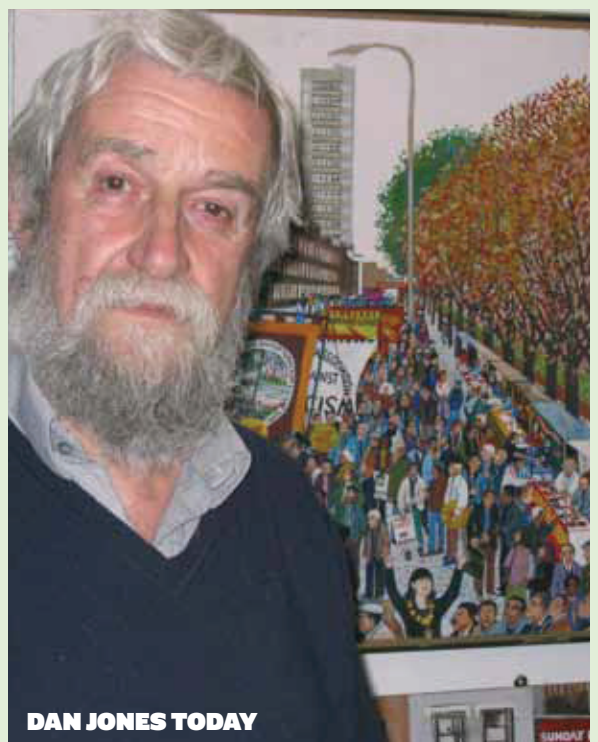
After a number of confrontations the fascists were eventually driven from the area and the activities of the summer of 1978 became known as the "Battle of Brick Lane."

the right to live and work in peace like anyone else, but the pattern of racist attacks continues. Black people complain of harassment by the police and often that the victims of racist attacks are the people arrested while racist incitement is ignored. Now the black people face a whole new generation of discriminatory practices by the State: passports are demanded by officials in housing departments, dole offices, education offices and hospitals. The screw tightens as Britain's increasingly racist laws and rules on nationality and immigration break up black families and treat black people as second class citizens.

As the whole political climate moves in a more racist direction, what were once the mouthings of a tiny fringe of extremists have now become the common currency of major parties. The struggle

against the ideas of Hitler and his heirs continues today. We have driven the National Front from their Shoreditch headquarters, action is at last being taken against the bookstall that has sold Nazi propaganda against Jews and black people at the Sunday market in Brick Lane for many months. But Sieg Heil salutes and racist chants still echo from the North Bank at West Ham football ground, and outside the schoolgates our children are handed poisonous leaflets that claim the Holocaust was a Jewish lie. We despair since white unemployed youth are still attracted to the British Movement.

Racism flourishes where there is insecurity, unemployment, bad social conditions and an easy scapegoat. It will not disappear until we tackle fundamental problems and attitudes that lie deep in our area."



DAN JONES TODAY