

The Battle of Lewisham

It is thirty years since anti-fascists fought the fascist National Front and their protectors, the police, on the streets of southeast London at the "Battle of Lewisham" of 1977. The NF was routed. It was an important working-class victory and contrasts strikingly with the lame "anti-fascism" of today — when the labour movement scarcely lifts its collective finger as the BNP take up council seats in places like Dagenham. Dan Katz tells the story.

THE POLARISED class struggle of the early 1970s had a toxic by-product: the emergence of a populist British fascism. The National Front (NF), led by John Tyndall and Martin Webster, grew rapidly. The NF campaigned against black immigration and its members and sympathisers were responsible for a series of racist attacks.

It didn't help that the labour movement was extremely slow to shake off its backwardness on questions of race: one turning point was the mass union support for the Asian Grunwicks strikers, after August 1976.

Another key period was the left-led anti-racist and anti-fascist protests against the Front during the late 70s. These actions cemented the idea that the left and the labour movement were forces that could effectively confront racism and fascism. Central to that period was the "Battle of Lewisham".

The background

In the mid-70s the fascists were winning votes in local elections. The National Front had won 44,000 votes in elections in Leicester in 1976. With the National Party — a breakaway from the Front — the total fascist vote reached 38 per cent in local elections in Blackburn. The NF received 119,000 votes in the May 1977 Greater London Council elections, and almost quarter of a million votes across the country in that year's local elections. During this period, the National Front claimed to have up to 20,000 members, and it had the money and the resources to distribute five million leaflets each year. The NF stood 413 candidates in local elections in 1977.

In Lewisham, southeast London — an area with a large African-Caribbean working class population — the fascists had found some support. They were able to win 44% in a local election in Deptford (the NF vote combined with the National Party).

On 30 May 30 1977 the overtly racist local police staged dawn raids on 30 homes in New Cross and Lewisham. They picked up 60 black youth and charged 21 with "conspiracy to steal from persons unknown", and "loitering with intent".

In response, the Lewisham 21 Defence Committee was set up to support those arrested, as well as three others arrested in a subsequent scuffle with police.

On Saturday 2 July the Lewisham 21 Defence Committee demonstrated in New Cross. According to local papers, "300 demonstrators marched through Lewisham and New Cross" and more than 100 National Front supporters turned out to attack them. One newspaper reported that "Shoppers rushed for cover as racials stormed down New Cross Road" and that the NF threw bottles, "rotten fruit and bags of caustic soda at marchers". More than 60 people, fascists and anti-fascists, were arrested.

The following Monday, 4 July, NF organiser Richard Edmunds declared that the Front would march in New Cross in August. He claimed that thousands of fascists would demonstrate to "clear the streets of black muggers and their red friends".

The same day the All Lewisham Campaign Against Racism and Fascism (ALCARAF) called for peaceful demonstration to take place on same day as NF march.

However three weeks later, 600 people attended a public meeting in Lewisham Concert Hall called by Lewisham 21 Defence Committee. They had a different idea. The meeting passed a motion calling "for a united mobilisation to stop the Nazis... We call for all black people, socialists and trade unionists, to assemble at 1 pm on August 13 at Clifton Rise, New Cross, so that

Daily Mail COMMENT

After the Battle of Lewisham,
a question of vital importance

NOW WHO WILL DEFEND HIM?

A CARVING knife, honed to razor sharpness. A metal pipe, with wickedly lacerating studs. These exhibits, held grimly aloft by a London bobby, come from the murderous weaponry deployed against the police on Bloody Saturday.

Truly they are the regalia of hate. Hate for the police, for authority, for law and order and liberties enshrined within that order.

Here was no honest, spontaneous anger by decent people against a racist parade.

This was a contrived assault, with acid and knife and brick and bludgeon on the police: an evil and premeditated attempt to scar authority, slash liberty and engender panic and fear in an already troubled community.

Gashed, bruised and bleeding, Britain's police held the front line for freedom. They have not seen rougher nor more ominous action since the Thirties.

In defending the right of the repellent National Front to march through the racially sensitive areas of Lewisham and Deptford, they presented themselves as the prime target for the Red storm-troopers of the Left.

But it wasn't bags of flour and placards and jeers they had to face this time. It was blinding ammonia and caustic soda.

Yesterday, on BBC radio, a leader of the Socialist Workers' Party rubbed in the meaning of this vicious confrontation which saw more than 50 policemen injured. It was all the fault of the police, he said. Their's was the provocation.

And the ammonia? And the knives? He refused, though repeatedly challenged, to condemn their use.

Saturday, August 13, 1977, is a

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The dangers, by Lord
Hailsham—Page SIX

The shields of freedom
Centre Pages

The police are our shield against the paranoia and thuggery of back street revolutionaries.

Now, we have seen more clearly than ever just what they are defending us against, and how savage and unscrupulous the forces are that they have to confront for our sake.

For too long we have taken them for granted. Turned a deaf ear to their complaints over pay and manning. Walked by quickly on the other side of the road when they needed our help.

It is late, terrifyingly late, for them and for us. We must back our police. We have to support them. We have to pay these brave men what they're worth.

As for those who wage war with the knife and the acid bottle



Daily Mail hysteria

"They shall not pass". Clifton Rise was the area near New Cross station where the NF march, now set for Saturday 13 August, was due to assemble.

Workers' Action, a forerunner of *Solidarity*, urged a mass turnout, saying both the peaceful march and the attempt to stop the fascists assembling should be backed, but that, "the main thrust should be to take the measures necessary to prevent the insult of fascists parading through Lewisham... maximum possible support should be given at Clifton Rise".

At the beginning of August Martin Webster, the NF's national organiser, told press: "The Reds have had it all their own way and the only way you can fight Communism is to confront it. We believe that the multi-racial society is wrong, is

evil and we want to destroy it." Richard Edmunds commented: "We are deliberately going into the black areas of Deptford because these are also the areas where we have a lot of support", and: "This march is deliberately provocative."

Lewisham's Labour Council petitioned the Labour Home Secretary to have the NF march banned. But Metropolitan Police commissioner David McNee issued a statement opposing ban, saying that it "would not only defer to mob rule but encourage it". McNee was clearly looking for a confrontation.

On the day, two types of anti-fascism

Anti-fascists began assembling at Clifton Rise from 11.00 am.

Simultaneously the ALCARAF demonstration

gathered in the rain in Ladywell Fields, two miles away. The South London Press reported that, "Over 5000 people from more than 80 organisations congregat[e]d in Ladywell Fields to hear speeches by the Mayor of Lewisham and the Bishop of Southwark."

The march took half an hour to leave the park on its way to New Cross. But police blocked the way, a mile short of New Cross at the junction of Loampit Hill and Algernon Road in Lewisham town centre.

ALCARAF leader and Communist Party member Mike Power appealed "for the march to disband peacefully." Although the march had been stopped many protesters found their way through the backstreets to New Cross.

From 1.30pm, 800 National Front members,