


RED AGITATOR SPECIAL

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PERSONALLY, I DON'T
AGREE WITH WHAT
HE SAYS, BUT I
DEFEND HIS RIGHT
TO SAY IT

LSE



NO PLATFORM FOR FASCISTS

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The Case for Free Speech.

A hue and cry has been raised throughout the student movement over the decision of the last NUS Conference to deny a platform to Fascist and Racist propagandists. Up and down the country, college unions have been calling for the reversal of this policy. Every vote against the policy has been cheered to the echo by the high-minded staff of those noble defenders of Free Speech - the Daily Mail and Daily Express. It is a long time since any student got this sort of press coverage.

Support from these quarters must embarrass some of the people who want to reverse the NUS decision - to be found on the same side as the Tory Press is not a pleasant thing. We do not doubt for a moment that most of the people who are raising the banner of free speech are sincere opponents of racism, whether in South Africa or in Britain. Of course, here and there, the fascist or racist has welcomed the chance to present their policies in a more popular disguise, but the vast majority of the opponents of NUS policy are decent liberals. They fear and hate the tramp of marching jackboots as much as anyone. They put forward a serious arguments as to why we should allow Fascists to speak, and they deserve a serious answer. We are arguing over how to fight racism and fascism, not whether or not we are opposed to it.

The liberal argument runs more or less as follows:

"Of course we are opposed to fascism. We believe that it is an evil system based on false and reactionary ideas. It pretends to be able to prove that people of different religion or skin pigmentation are in some way radically different from, and inferior to, the rest of us. We know that this is a false argument, and we can prove very easily that it is false. When the fascist or racist speaker comes to the college, we will attend his meetings and put forward our arguments. We will expose him or her as intellectually bankrupt. All reasonable people in the audience will be convinced by us and will come to oppose racism or fascism. Even if we fail with one or two people, the total number of racists and fascists is very small, and they pose no real threat. All you will achieve by breaking up their meetings is to give them a lot of publicity. That will only give them a bigger audience. It is much better for us to expose them by reasoned arguments".

On the face of it, that is quite a strong case. We agree that the ideas put forward by racists and fascists are completely false, and we are convinced that our arguments are much stronger. But we still believe that it is wrong to give them a hearing. We believe that to allow them to speak will be precisely the strategy which will give them a chance to grow and extend their influence. It is because we are determined to prevent such a growth that we want to put forward the arguments to support the ban on these speakers. The fascists and racists are not in their sordid business to win debates - they want action, and unless we stop them, they will get it.

The NUS Resolution.

The motion passed at Liverpool Conference was a long one, and dealt with many aspects of the fight against racialism, but the part which has caused the furore is Ammendment 4.

The operative parts are as follows:

"Conference recognises the need to refuse assistance (financial or otherwise) to openly racist or fascist organisations or societies.....and to deny them a platform.

However conference believes that in order to counter these groups, it is also necessary to prevent any member of these organisations or individuals known to espouse similar views from speaking in colleges by whatever means necessary (including disrupting of the meeting)".

Student unions are therefore called upon to: "Prevent any racist or fascist propaganda being displayed, sold, distributed or propagated through meetings by whatever means may be necessary". The motion goes on to call upon the executives of unions to give full support to those who attempt to carry out these policies.

We believe that this policy is fundamentally correct, and we think that it is vital to maintain it. That does not mean that we do not have criticisms of the policy. As we will argue below, it is a mistake to simply identify fascism and racism, for the tactics we use will differ in some cases. More importantly, we think that such a policy should have been preceded by a campaign in colleges throughout the country to win mass support. It is only by gaining such support that the resolution will be effective in any case, and the failure to co-ordinate such a campaign has led to much confusion.

The policy itself only expresses what has happened in practice in many colleges in the last few years. On numerous occasions, the meetings of open racists and fascists have been prevented or disrupted. Unless we can win the fight for this policy, then it will become that much harder to win the fight at a local level. The stakes are quite high in this battle, and we must be clear about what is at stake.

The Roots of Racism.

In order to understand why the voice of argument will not win the fight against racism, we must look at the forces which give this illogical and groundless theory its appeal.

For the vast majority of people, life under capitalism is very far from the dream world of the Sunday papers. It is mean, cramped, and unpleasant - a life of insecurity, narrow horizons and meaningless labour. It is no wonder that many look for an explanation for their discontents. Housing is bad, hospitals are poor, inflation is rife, jobs are increasingly insecure - somehow, somewhere, someone must be to blame for all this misery. For some people, the cause of these problems is identified as the capitalist system, and the solution is seen to lie in the struggle for socialism. For a majority, however, this solution for one reason or another is rejected as implausible. As British capitalism edges further into crisis, among the majority the search for an alternative explanation of the causes of the crisis becomes imperative.

For many, black people are a convenient scapegoat. Luring the post-war boom British capitalism encouraged the immigration into this country of large numbers of black people to work in a whole number of types of job which native British workers were reluctant to do because of better alternatives elsewhere, but which were for, say, a West Indian infinitely preferable to the incredibly high unemployment and miserable poverty to which British capitalism had condemned his own country. As the boom began to falter in the sixties, however, the presence of concentrations of black people in British towns offered a palpable target for the frustrations of workers hit by the crisis. From inside and outside the Tory Party there emerged racist demagogues who placed the blame upon black workers for unemployment, bad social services etc. With the economy in increasing difficulty, the "respectable" politicians in the Tory establishment and in the Labour Party took up the arguments of the racists as a convenient way of deflecting working class discontent with the system. In 1962, when

the first immigration controls were imposed by the Macmillan government, the Labour Party in Parliament firmly attacked the surrender to the demagoguery of the racists. Very rapidly, however, once in power, Labour found itself happily imposing immigration restrictions. The last ten years have seen what were once the arguments of a lunatic fringe to the right of the Tory Party transformed into the common sense of all parliamentary parties.

Part of this process of rendering racism respectable has been the emergence of figures like Eysenck. Eysenck's intellectual progenitor is Jensen whose claim that black people are inherently inferior to white people was taken up by the press and the academics in the United States after the rebellion of the urban blacks in the late sixties, as a convenient justification for the "benign neglect" of the ghettos. Eysenck's own work is nothing more than a rankly ideological attempt to justify the sort of academic racism that in its cruder forms consists in South African professors measuring the brains of blacks as a way of justifying apartheid. His danger lies in the fact that this sort of pseudo-scientific propaganda renders the arguments of Powell, the NF and the rest of the send-them-back-mob some sort of respectability. To debate with Eysenck, to treat him as a genuine scientist, is thus to indirectly legitimise Powellism. This is not to say that we should go out to break up meetings which he addresses - the real threat lies in organised fascist groups - but rather that we should picket them and organise counter-meetings in order to show up the real nature of his ideas.

Socialists have a ready answer to this racialist rhetoric. They point to the role that the sweated labour of black workers had in contributing to the prosperity of post-war British capitalism. They argue that unemployment, bad housing, rotten social services result from the subordination of society to the voracious drive for profit by those in control. They therefore reject immigration control as an attempt to shift the blame for the failings of the system on to black people. Instead, they fight for the unity of black and white workers in struggle against the system. But at the same time it remains the case that racist arguments receive a ready hearing among workers. And this fact is used by capitalists to prevent any united and co-ordinated working class response by splitting the labour movement. It is in this context that the fascist movements have emerged and flourished.

The Fascist Menace.

British fascism has its roots in the inter-war period when Mosley and the British Union of Fascists attempted to apply the experience of Hitler and Mussolini in Germany and Italy. The present leaders of the National Front are the British students of Nazism, and are permeated by its spirit. In 1962 Colin Jordan and the present leaders of the NF, Tyndall and Webster, were gaoled for organising a para-military group, the Spearhead. On his release Tyndall wrote in the journal National Socialist: "The SS man has been our model; an SS State is now our aim". A.K.Chesterton, an old DUF member and former Policy Director of the NF, said when he retired that he was tired out of trying to head-off schemes to blow up synagogues and kill black people.

If their ideology is that of British Nazism, the NF attempts to present a more palatable face to the world now. This is made possible by the fostering of racism that we have described. They seek to take up the perhaps semi-articulate racist sentiments of those who are hit by the crisis, now increasingly respectable thanks to the demagoguery of Powell, the collapse of the liberals, and the pseudo-science of Eysenck, in order to build up a mass movement for themselves. For them it is not a matter of spreading for their own sake. Rather their aim is to drive a wedge into the working class and thus create a mass base for themselves, which they can then use

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in the streets. This is already happening. There have been a whole stream of incidents - attacks on black people, the incitement of race riots, etc. - in which the NF have a hand. Moreover there are groups to the NF's right who are impatient with its moderation(!) and who seek to hot-up the pace of racist attacks. Thus the National Democratic Freedom Movement in Leeds has grown in the last few months from 3 to 200. Its programme is avowedly racist and fascist and committed to violence against the blacks and 'the alien Jews'. The number of violent attacks inspired by the NLFM on blacks and socialists is on the increase.

The response to our arguments about the threat of fascism in this country is often to discount it: the strength of the traditions of British democracy are so great, the British people are so sensible, that fascism will never grow into a serious menace here. To this there are two replies. Firstly, it is not the case that fascism has never been a threat in Britain. On the contrary, in the conditions of prolonged depression in the 1930s, Mosley's championing of the politics of Mussolini and Hitler found a ready echo in many quarters. He was able to organize squads of stormtroopers, the Blackshirts, and to attempt to carry out Goebbels' slogan 'conquer the streets'. The Blackshirts were sent into the East End as a direct challenge to the labour movement and in order to attack the large numbers of Jews living there. This challenge was defeated because the Communist Party took it up and responded, not by debating with Mosley in order to demonstrate by rational argument the error of his ways, but by taking to the streets and meeting the fascist challenge head-on. On October 4th, 1936, in an incident called the Battle of Cable Street, 100,000 workers from the East End fought the police and the Blackshirts and drove the fascists out of the East End. This defeat undercut Mosley's chances of building a mass base for himself: the whole point of a fascist movement is to build a military organisation that can succeed in controlling the streets and thus proving its worth to the ruling-class should they decide to opt for wholesale repression of the working-class.

Secondly, we have to look at the sort of conditions in which fascist movements grow. They grow when the system is faced with a serious crisis and when there is widespread discontent with the system, but when the working-class movement is unable to provide an effective alternative. In these sort of conditions a fascist movement can grow very quickly. When Mussolini formed his party in 1919 it probably had about 800 members; 12 months later, after the defeat of the factory councils movement in Turin and the consequent demoralisation among the working-class; there were 100,000 members. These sort of conditions may well emerge in this country in the near future. The economy is faced with the likelihood of serious recession and hence high unemployment around the end of the year. If this is combined with an unwillingness on the part of the trade union leadership to lead a determined fight in defence of workers' living standards in a situation of raging inflation plus formal or informal wage controls, there is likely to be widespread demoralisation among workers. These are the conditions in which a fascist movement could grow very quickly. The NF is well aware of this. Hence their championing not only of repatriation of blacks, and opposition to the EEC, but also of anti-capitalist slogans like 'Smash Phase Three'. Their support is on the increase: they ran 54 candidates in the last election, got television time and pulled more votes than the Communist Party and the candidates of the extreme left.

The colleges are another potential base for the fascists. Far from being the havens of Reason and Science of liberal rhetoric, the Universities in other countries have proved to be one of the most fertile grounds for fascist ideas and sources of fascist storm-troopers. This was true of Italy, Germany and France between the wars;

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it is true of Chile now. The National Front have a student organiser who is a student at Goldsmith's College, London, and are seeking to extend their base in colleges by holding meetings, spreading their propaganda there and so on.

The fascist danger is consequently an urgent one. It is one that consists in the increasing attempt to use racist propaganda to build a mass base for the attacks on black people and the labour movement. Because of its character, it is not a threat that can be combatted at the level of ideas. What the fascists are interested in is action and they must be met by action.

Stop the Fascists Speaking

The racists and fascists in Britain today are working hand in glove to build a mass movement capable of putting their ideas into practise. They are using appeals to the basest and most irrational fears in our society. The only way to prevent their growth is to nip them in the bud. The complacent argument that we should let them scuttle through the sewers of capitalism is fundamentally wrong. The rats will not go away. On the contrary, the bearers of that deadly plague will fatten and grow if we ignore them now. We can only prevent them by vigorous and determined counter-measures. The fight against vermin is a fight against the conditions that breed them, but it is also a war to exterminate the vermin themselves. We must stop them now.

The argument that we should reason with them has been tried before. It is the argument which failed against Hitler. The German people paid in blood and misery for that mistake. Let us not repeat that experience. Those who repeat the arguments of the German liberals are the Bourbons of pure reason. The Bourbons forgot nothing and learnt nothing from the French Revolution. Our modern Bourbons have not forgotten the black litany of Dachau, Duchenwald, Bergen-Belsen and Auschwitz. They have not learnt the lessons of Cable Street.

Racism and fascism will not be defeated by reason, for they do not appeal to reason. They are political movements designed to smash and destroy. Among the things that they smash are just those apostles of free speech that are today so keen to let the fascists organise.

The racists and fascists of today are not something that we can ignore. They are a growing menace. The liberties we have today are worth defending, small though they are. Fascism aims to smash, racism creates the conditions for their destruction. We cannot allow the open fascist, or the concealed fascist working in the Monday Club or some similar organisation to gain a hearing. Every meeting that they hold gives them confidence. Every apologist for racism lends them comfort. Every liberal who debates with them gives them aid - much against their will.

Every time they are stopped from meeting, every time their meetings are broken up, their task becomes harder and harder. The moral of the fascists falls. People turn away from them as a miserable and pathetic group with nothing to offer. Every success that we have demonstrates to the waverers that we are a better solution. That is the only way to fight fascism and racism.