

# The Respectable Revolutionaries: Leamington Anti-Racist Anti- Fascist Committee 1977-1981

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**A**LTHOUGH for many people who don't know the area, Leamington may still have an image of a genteel spa town full of elderly rich people in bath chairs, this is far from the truth. It's a place very much divided socially and economically – a division broadly represented by the river running through it. South of the river there are mainly working class areas, a cosmopolitan mix of people who moved to the town after the War to work in the medium-sized and large factories in the area – including Lockheed, Ford, and Flavels. This mixture contained Indians (mainly Sikhs), Irish, Scottish, Welsh and West Indian. Even in the 1970s the towns of Leamington and nearby Warwick were mainly Labour/Liberal voting – it was a commonly held belief that the Tory MP only got in because of the votes from surrounding villages.

In Leamington an anti-racist organisation had existed in the mid-1970s. This had largely been as a response to the activities of a high-profile local fascist, Robert Relf. His well publicised campaign (locally and nationally) to have the right to sell his house to a white family had caused bitter divisions in the town. It had also given the green light for every tinpot racist to spout their nonsense in the pubs, clubs, workplaces and local press, hiding behind free speech and individual liberty. It also tragically contributed to a climate in which racist attacks (and, in one case, murder) occurred.

LARAFAC itself began in November 1977 as an immediate response to the shock number of votes for a British Movement candidate in a district council by-election in Aylesford Ward, Leamington, earlier that month. I joined it when I moved to Leamington in April 1978. I was an active member of the group until it was disbanded in 1981.

For socialists in Britain the period in question is often associated with the rise of a mass anti-fascist movement based around the Anti-Nazi League (ANL).

Throughout the country, though, not all socialists/anti-fascists based their work around the

core anti-Nazi initiatives undertaken by the extensive network of ANL branches and activity. A handful of local groups developed their own approaches, putting much more emphasis on explicitly socialist anti-racist work. LARAFAC was one such organisation.

Although concerned to oppose local fascist activity, it considered the most effective way to accomplish this was by addressing the wider issues around racism.

Underpinning this approach were the broadly socialist beliefs held by all the activists on the Committee, which consisted of members of the Indian Workers Associations, Labour Party, Socialist Challenge, Socialist Workers Party (of which I was a member), supporters of Big Flame and non-aligned anarchists and socialists.

Whilst most members of LARAFAC were revolutionaries, the general principles of “united front” work were upheld. This, though, didn't lead to a “watering down” of its core beliefs. It's often tempting for revolutionaries to believe that this is always necessary because people will be largely impervious to explicitly socialist ideas. The work of LARAFAC proves this is not always the case.

Individuals from various local political organisations (including both Indian Workers Associations) were involved in LARAFAC. They were instrumental in ensuring their own organisations formally and publically supported LARAFAC and its activities. The clear translation of LARAFAC's socialist anti-racism into militant activism never alienated that support from non-revolutionary institutions. Whilst its approach was questioned and challenged from various quarters from time to time, its key role in the struggle against racism was ultimately acknowledged and approved of – to the extent that it was perceived as the anti-racist body in the Leamington area by all relevant local organisations from the Indian and West Indian communities and political organisations. The Community Relations Council became a discredited and

irrelevant Indian Congress and Tory Party rump.

The Newsletter was central to LARAFc's work and was used as a key element in raising anti-racist issues locally. Its circulation was roughly 500-1000 for each issue – all sold in the Leamington and Warwick area. There were the usual outlets for anti-racist activity – the Indian Workers Associations, Labour Party branches, revolutionary socialist groups, trade union branches and the West Indian Association. What gave the Newsletter its relatively large circulation was sales around the working class areas. Combatting racist ideas amongst the white working classes was key to our work and reaching them in every way possible with sound socialist anti-racist ideas was central to LARAFc's approach.

The Newsletter also reflected another vital concern – not to be (and be seen to be) merely reacting to fascist initiatives. Challenging racist ideas of all kinds by explaining their roots and implications for the working classes would provide ammunition for readers to use in their everyday lives, with their families, friends, workmates etc.

Another aspect of LARAFc which, again, the Newsletter reflected, was the "professionalism" of its approach to anything it produced. Sufficient resources were always found to ensure that the Group were not forced to produce material that was on poor quality paper or not very "easy on the eye". Not only was it seen as insulting to the readers, it was felt that sub-standard literature didn't reflect well on the organisation – building up credibility in every way possible was vital.

Also, rather than keep the local media at arm's length (a perhaps natural knee-jerk instinct for many activists) LARAFc actively "courted" them. This paid dividends. The Committee frequently reached a large local audience through quotes given to (but rarely altered by) local newspapers and by publicity for various events and activities (which complemented the highly visible advertising used by LARAFc). Press releases were regular and on certain occasions (appearances by local fascists in court, for example) press/information packs were provided for any journalists present.

I have to emphasise – despite these approaches (which provided ample opportunities to "compromise") – LARAFc's socialist principles and militant anti-racism were never undermined. I believe that the main reasons for this were (1) the support and encouragement its work received from the local black and Asian communities (which saw LARAFc as a genuinely effective anti-racist force) and (2) the forging of increasingly strong links with white working class people who we reached mainly through selling the Newsletter in work-places/at home.

At the General Election of 1979, a right-wing Tory Party under Thatcher undermined the National Front, stealing much of its racist appeal. The success or failure of LARAFc can only really be judged at local level. Like most of his counterparts

elsewhere, the sitting MP in Leamington and Warwick was a right-wing racist. But such a scenario didn't prevent the National Front from putting up candidates in other constituencies harbouring Tories with similar credentials. The National Front and British Movement Regional Organisers lived in Leamington and Warwick, respectively. Yet they were so demoralised by the activities of LARAFc that they couldn't even summon up the effort to make a token gesture of standing a candidate. In fact, the local Indian Workers Associations even tried to persuade the Committee to stand a candidate of its own. Potentially the first possible "socialist unity" candidate in Britain.

Despite the post-election disintegration of fascist activity locally (and, to a large extent, nationally), anti-racist work continued unabated – it had been the core of LARAFc's work anyway. The prevalence of organised racist activity and overt expressions of racist views e.g. graffiti, letters to local papers, declined substantially during the period of LARAFc's existence. Before then, local sympathy and support for Robert Relf had been quite widespread (aided and abetted by the Tory MP speaking out in his support when he went on hunger strike etc.). By 1980, the key fascists were so marginalised they withdrew from any activity. Relf left the area, two died in the early 1980s and one rejoined the Labour Party in Warwick – whether this reflected a change of heart/views is another matter. Their attempts to build a fascist core around them had failed dismally. I think LARAFc can rightly claim much of the credit for this.

The revolutionary groups represented on the Committee attracted only small numbers of new members directly as a result of LARAFc's anti-racist activity. Remember, though, the wider political context – mass unemployment and a trade union movement in retreat and disarray under Thatcher's onslaught.

The organisation was successful in a key objective, though – to isolate the fascists from the widespread "soft" racism in the area. LARAFc also succeeded in mobilising all anti-racist sentiment and activity around it, establishing credibility even amongst clearly non-revolutionary (and even non-socialist) organisations in the Leamington area, despite the overt socialism of its campaigning. The Community Relations Council was a discredited irrelevance. There was no room for softer anti-racist versions that sprang up elsewhere i.e. Liberal/Church/CP-based groups, splitting the anti-racist movement. Potential supporters and participants in such groups had little choice but to back LARAFc (formally and publicly). It became the only show in town. Despite the reservations they almost certainly had about LARAFc's overtly militant socialist anti-racism, to not support it would have utterly marginalised them in the area, particularly as far as the Indian and West Indian communities were concerned.

The Committee disbanded in 1981, mainly because the increasing depredations of Thatcherism meant that socialists had major battles to fight on several other fronts as well – mass unemployment, further attacks on basic trade union rights, the nuclear arms race etc. Anti-racist work was undertaken alongside other socialist activity and not prioritised as it had been to a great extent in the late 1970s. Explicitly anti-fascist work declined substantially following the electoral obliteration of the NF and that organisation's subsequent disintegration in the early 1980s.

It would be a waste if the legacy of groups like LARAFc was restricted to dust-gathering in archive libraries or, at best, the source for narrow academic works. How can activists ensure that their anti-racist work is effective? LARAFc's example suggests that it has to be based on explicitly socialist (i.e. working class based) approaches, explanations and ideas. Watering these down (or dispensing with them completely) to "win over" some mythical "public opinion" or the (paper, usually) support of "respectable" members of a community is tying one hand behind our backs. It will only give the initiative over to those who have no such concerns. ■

## Note

24 Newsletters were produced by LARAFc between September 1978 and the Summer of 1981. These Newsletters were central to the work of the organisation, reflecting the breadth of its work and used as the basis for actively organising against racism.

Copies of all Newsletters (and other LARAFc material) are kept at Warwick University's Modern Records Centre (Record Reference MSS.247).

Contact: Mrs Christine Woodland (Archivist), Modern Records Centre, University Library, Warwick University, Coventry CV4 7AL.

Telephone: 024-7652-4219

Email: [archives@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:archives@warwick.ac.uk)

Website: <http://modernrecords.warwick.ac.uk>

Library opening times are: Monday-Tuesday 9-5, Wednesday-Thursday 9-7, Friday 9-4.



## UNITE AGAINST FASCISM

Unite Against Fascism is a national campaign with the aim of alerting British society to the rising threat of the extreme right, in particular the British National Party (BNP), gaining an electoral foothold in this country. It aims to unite the broadest possible spectrum of society to counter this threat.

[www.uaf.org.uk](http://www.uaf.org.uk)

## UK Left Network

UK Left Network is an internet forum where communists, socialists, and other left-wingers who either live in the UK or are interested in UK politics can meet and discuss. This forum recognises that no one left group has the monopoly on the truth, and that Marxism will only be developed if we are able to discuss our differences openly, and not behind the backs of our class. Comrades from all traditions, of any organisation or none, are welcome.

[http://groups.yahoo.com/group/UK\\_Left\\_Network](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/UK_Left_Network)