



## UK: The Rise of the Far Right - and how to stop it

Jeremy Dewar, redflagonline Tue, 21/08/2018 - 11:52

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On July 14, amidst the political chaos of the Tory cabinet's splits over Brexit and Donald Trump's visit, a 'Free Tommy Robinson' rally packed Whitehall with 6-10,000 assorted far rightists, fascists and the members of football firms, who form the base of the Democratic Football Lads Alliance (DFLA). They were joined outside Downing Street by a smaller demonstration of "Britain Loves Trump" supporters.

Although their numbers were down on the June 9 'Free Tommy' march, which mobilised 10-15,000, and the Stand Up to Racism counter demonstration was larger than in June, with some 3,000, Socialist Worker's comment that 'they were fewer and we were more than before', was bordering on complacent.

The antifascist forces, despite the event being widely advertised at the preceding day's vast anti-Trump demo, were, once again, completely outnumbered. Worse still, after the demos dispersed, fascist teams were free to pick off groups of anti-fascist demonstrators in the area. In one such attack, Steve Hedley, senior assistant general secretary of the RMT, was assaulted in a nearby pub.

Since then, we have seen the trashing of the SWP and TUC's London bookshop and the rise of attacks on mosques (two in Birmingham recently) as well as Boris Johnson climbing on the islamophobic bandwagon with his jeering remarks about women who wear the veil.

The re-entry onto the scene of Nigel Farage could see a populist mass movement, linked to the Tory right wing around Boris Johnson and Jacob Rees-Mogg to 'save Brexit' from 'betrayal'.

Where the far right surge came from

The far right in Britain has demonstrated a growing strength over the past year, in a series of large street rallies most of which the left and the labour movement have been unable to match, let alone confront.

At first, they were built mainly by linking up 'firms' of football hooligans, but organised fascist groups are increasingly in evidence. In the briefly imprisoned Tommy Robinson (real name Stephen Yaxley-Lennon), they acquired a martyr, and quickly built an online cult around him. Various 'respectable' far right politicians in Europe and the USA, including Geert Wilders and Steve Bannon, have called for his release.

Robinson, a petty criminal who has served prison sentences for assault, joined the fascist BNP in 2004 and founded the English Defence League in 2009 and the abortive Pegida UK, in 2013. Despite a short period of supposed 'repentance' for his anti-Muslim incitement and brief involvement with the dubious Quilliam Foundation, he quickly returned to a vicious baiting of Muslims, both online and in the print media.

"Robinson" is not the originator of the present resurgence of the racist right. The credit for that must go to John Meighan who organised anti-Islam marches in the wake of the London Bridge terrorist attack and the Manchester Arena bombing in March and May of last year. The first two marches of the Football Lads Alliance (FLA) on 24 June and 7 October last year attracted crowds of between 10,000 and 20,000.

Tensions arose within that movement when Meighan tried to ban Union Jacks, the banners of fascist groups and traditional far right regalia from the marches in order to attract non-fascists. His opponents accused him of mishandling

funds and a split occurred. A rival, the Democratic FLA, rapidly won the battle for the football firms' allegiance and associated itself with Tommy Robinson in a 5,000 strong rally, the "Day for Freedom", in Whitehall on 6 May. The "freedom" in question being their "right" to incite hatred of Muslims and refugees and to denigrate Islam as a religion.

Robinson's publicity stunt, in which he got himself arrested for filming defendants at a Leeds Crown Court hearing and then streaming it online, paid off handsomely. He was sentenced to 13 months in jail for contempt of court on 29 May, making him the focus for the new movement. Instantly, a #FreeTommy online movement developed with a series of rallies in central London and in cities like Leeds and Manchester and an online petition which quickly gathered over 500,000 signatures. Though the movement's mass base is the FLA firms it draws in white supremacist and islamophobic groups like Generation Identity.

### Islamophobia

Like its EDL predecessor, this movement is virulently Islamophobic, targeting Muslims as Oswald Moseley targeted the Jews. Indeed, many of the old tropes of antisemitism have been revived such as the "preying on (white) young girls" and targeting women who wear the hijab or niqab. Speakers rant about a Muslim invasion, the establishment of Sharia Law in the UK, etc. and the threat to "our" Judeo-Christian civilization and free speech. It has even pressed into service feminism, secularism, gay rights and, yes, Zionism too, to attack Islam and disguise its own fascist roots. This makes it a rather different target from Moseley's British Union of Fascists in the 1930s, Martin Webster's National Front in the 1970s or John Tyndall's British National Party where the fascism was pretty obvious.

However, the DFLA and Robinson's supporters have made a particular target of Sadiq Khan, London's first Muslim Mayor. They tried to raise a Peppa Pig inflatable with Khan's face on it in Trafalgar Square on July 14. They hate the left, the trade unions and the newly resurgent Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn.

In addition, "Tommy Robinson" now has the support of a growing array of US Alt-Right and European racist populist parties. Steve Bannon, Trump's former advisor and the eminence grise of Breitbart News, has called him "the fucking backbone of England". The July 14 rally was "chaired" by Raheem Kassam, Breitbart's London editor. The "free Tommy" demand was also endorsed by Sam Brownback, the US Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom (sic) and his legal costs have been financed by far-right think tanks, like the US Middle East Forum. Gerard Batten, temporary leader of UKIP, is clearly a hard rightist and islamophobe, at one of the Free Tommy rallies he called the prophet of Islam a paedophile, to loud cheers.

We have to take this coming together of racist populists and assorted fascists deadly seriously. The deep political crisis in Britain over Brexit, which will come to a head between October and March, could create the conditions for it to become a movement on the streets to support a new right wing political force drawing in Tory "hard Brexiteers" like Boris Johnson and Jacob Rees-Mogg as well as the remnants of UKIP.

Nigel Farage, another rich boy pretending to be a man of the people, has announced he will "go back on the road to campaign once again" for the newly formed Leave Means Leave. Bragging, "I'm back!" he explained:

"It is now beyond doubt that the political class in Westminster and many of their media allies do not accept the EU referendum result. Well, I've had enough of their lies, deceit and treachery. The time has come to teach them a lesson one that they will never forget."

Arron Banks, who donated £8.6 million to the Leave campaign, will doubtless dig deep for this festival of chauvinism but, this time around, it could have street gangs at its disposal and the racist consequences will be even more overt.

The same combination of racist anti-immigrant hysteria and Europhobia has seen major successes on the continent. In Germany, street movements, like PEGIDA, have grown alongside the racist electoral force, the Alternative for Germany, AfD. We have also seen major increases in far right votes in France and in Austria, Hungary and Italy, far right populists are in government. Donald Trump's election as president gave a boost to this right wing populist resurgence and emboldened the fascistic far right too. The Robinson fans are enthusiastic Trump supporters and have

adapted his slogan to 'Make Britain Great Again'.

This surge of the right worldwide is a testimony to the fact that we have entered a new period of inter-imperialist rivalry. At first it takes the form of trade wars, border fences and the demonisation of refugees fleeing wars the great powers themselves created or fomented. Beyond this phase, however, lies the real threat of war. The sections of the ruling classes that are pushing these policies realise they need to create a mass base for themselves and national chauvinism and racism are the basis for it.

How to combat them

We need to build a campaign that not only confronts the far right on the streets with numbers that greatly outnumber and demoralise them but also tackles the racist politics that have become so mainstream in Britain today. The right wing propaganda of the tabloids and the shameless racism of parts of the political establishment, too, are the taproot for the growth of the far right.

Preparing to meet and defeat a mass racist and proto-fascist movement cannot be done by propaganda alone, nor by Love not Hate carnivals in public parks or by 'celebrating' multiculturalism. Of course, big Rock Against Racism type events can attract young people but then they need to be organised, recruited into local organisations that can respond quickly and overwhelmingly to the FLA mobilisations.

When racists and fascists take to the streets, the labour movement, and that means the Labour Party and the trade unions, as well as the Muslim and immigrant communities, must also take to the streets and in such huge numbers that it overwhelms them, making them feel small, impotent and afraid. We have to prevent them from intimidating and terrorising their targeted victims because any success in that will feed their growth

Mass antifascist mobilisations, however, have to be defended by people organised in advance to respond to fascist violence, so that the latter will think twice before trying it again. Unprepared and unwary masses can easily be scattered and humiliated by relatively small numbers of more hardened fighters. This means the unions and Labour Party branches, BAME community youth groups, sports clubs with a multiracial memberships, as well as the far left groups, should form defence groups which are trained to protect the masses of ordinary people we want to mobilise.

It is not sufficient to refer complacently to the 6 million trade unionists and 550,000 Labour Party members. If this 'mass membership' stays at home when the racists and fascists are on the march, then we are in trouble. Hundreds of thousands marched against Trump and his racism on the streets of London the day before the Robinson rally, yet only 3,500 turned up the next day to confront it. It is plain that Stand Up to Racism and the Socialist Workers Party are not the force that the SWP and the ANL were in the 1980s or even in the resistance to the EDL five or six years ago.

A new initiative?

What we need today is a national and local united front of all the antifascist and racist groups, the Labour Party and trade union branches, and the left political parties. Momentum needs to put its huge database to real use and mobilise all those with the new media skills so that we can overmatch the far right and their millionaire supporters. In every town and city, in every London borough, we should call meetings of all these elements to construct a network of resistance.

John McDonnell, in the wake of Boris Johnson's dog whistle anti-Muslim 'burqa' comments, has called for the relaunch of the Anti-Nazi League, saying: 'it's time for an Anti-Nazi League-type cultural and political campaign to resist' 'we can no longer ignore the rise of far-right politics in our society'.

This was swiftly followed by a letter signed by some of the original founders of Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League, which McDonnell described as 'very welcome'. He pledged that the Labour party 'will take a leading role in this movement against racism and fascism' adding that it was time to start 'serious practical work' to organise anti-racists and anti-fascists.

In Red Flag, we believe that the ANL of the late 1970s, and its revival in the 1990s, had features to avoid as well as to imitate. Alongside the essential mass mobilisations, it also courted capitalist parties, religious leaders and celebrities, who downplayed, or even opposed, organised self defence and where necessary forceful confrontation with fascist provocations. A new movement must also be rooted in local fighting organisations and not copy the top down approach of the past.

Certainly it would be excellent if the Labour Party NEC and Conference directed the national organisation, with all its constituencies and local branches, and its MPs, to organising on the streets against the racist and fascist right. Brilliant, too, if the trade unions DID likewise, taking the arguments against islamophobia and all varieties of racism into the workplaces and bringing out their memberships for mass mobilisations.

If we add to this the local branches of the Socialist Workers Party and the other far left groups, then we have the basis for forming local committees that can mobilise all their affiliates quickly when any threat presents itself. Such a force can easily face down the far right marches and rallies and prevent them from marching through areas with significant Muslim, Asian Afro-Caribbean and European immigrant communities. It is these communities themselves that we must mobilise, building an unbreakable chain of solidarity with the labour movement.

The threat of the right is an international one; Bannon and the US Alt right are trying to create something he calls 'The Movement' to link the racist parties of Europe to the Trump supporters' movement in the USA. His aim is to boost the far right parties in next year's EU Parliament elections. It should be obvious that the Left needs to be more international than our enemies.

Jeremy Corbyn once talked about Labour calling international conferences of parties fighting austerity in Europe. Since Syriza started implementing austerity, he has fallen silent on this idea. It falls to the rank and file of the Left in Labour, and the groups outside it, to take the initiative and call a meeting of anti-racist, anti-fascist movements and anti-austerity parties, trade unions, refugee and migrant groups. We did it with the summit sieges, anti-war mobilisations and the European social forums of 2000-2006; we can do it again.

Labour under Corbyn needs to develop a programme that is even more radical than the 2017 election manifesto. It needs to address the real needs of those who have been seduced by the lies of the Daily Mail, the Express and the Sun, which blame immigrants for poorly paid or no jobs, housing shortages etc.

What we need to drain the swamp of misery in the old industrial areas that feeds racism is a truly mass programme of well-paid job creation, of house, school and hospital building, all run by the public sector and paid for by taxation of the super-rich. Empowering working people to building a new world for themselves is the only answer to the bizarre fantasies of restoring 'lost' national greatness. Socialist hope is the only answer to racist and fascist despair. In the process, we must halt the rise of the Robinson crusade and show them in no uncertain terms that they have bitten off far more than they can chew.

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