

Newham 8 and the struggle for self-defence

THE TRIAL of the Newham 8 ended in late December last year with guilty of affray verdicts for four of the eight. The eight had been charged with conspiracy to cause injury, but the charges pursued at the trial were affray (involving all eight), individual assault and possessing offensive weapons. According to the prosecution, the eight went out armed with various weapons to beat up racists, and had beaten up police officers who identified themselves as such and tried to make an arrest.

The defence maintained that gangs of white thugs had twice come into the local school and attacked Asian schoolchildren. Since the police seemed indifferent, the Asian pupils had got together to prevent similar attacks from occurring on the way home from school. On the day of the incident three scruffily dressed white men in their early twenties had leapt out of an unmarked car and attacked a group of 30 to 40 young Asians. Believing them to be racist attackers, the Asians defended themselves. But their assailants turned out to be plain-clothes police. During the incident two policemen suffered bruising and minor cuts; one of the defendants

spent four days in hospital after being hit on the head with a police truncheon. Only one of the eight was found guilty of a minor assault.

Newham, in East London, with a large black population, has a history of racial attacks and fascist activity. The first incident to claim national attention was the case of the four Indian Virk brothers in April 1977, who defended themselves from an attack outside their house, but found themselves, not their attackers, convicted of serious bodily harm. The campaign around this case threw up the Newham Defence Committee, which went on to monitor and publicise racial attacks and police responses.

Racial attacks increased in the late 1970s as the Housing Department dispersed black families in white housing estates, some of which were National Front strongholds. And West Ham's football ground, in the centre of Newham, became a recruiting ground for young fascists (spectators were shocked to witness ranks of supporters giving fascist salutes and chanting 'Sieg Heil'). Then, in 1980, a 29 year-old accountant was stabbed to death in broad daylight on a busy shopping street. One of his killers exclaimed: "I've gutted a Paki". The response to the killing of Akhtar Ali Baig was immediate. Two marches, each of over 3,000 people, demonstrated against racist attacks and official indifference. The Newham Youth Movement led the protest with such slogans as "Don't mourn — organise" and "Here to stay, here to fight".

The Newham Monitoring Project was started as an attempt to convince a local MP of the level of racial attacks in the area

(in only three months of 1980, 80 attacks were recorded). The Project began its own paper in which attacks and police and local authority responses were reported, against a background of rising fascist activity. (In the 1983 general election Newham South had the highest proportion of NF voters of any constituency in the country).

Self-defence

The case of the Newham 8, perhaps the most important political black trial of 1983, has to be seen in the context of the whole struggle for 'self-defence' in this country.

Since the mid-1970s, Asian youth movements have been created in response to the need to defend their communities against racist attacks. In Southall, after the murder of Gurdeep Singh Chaggar in 1976, the Southall Youth Movement was formed; in Bradford, when the NF tried to march through Manningham, the Bradford Asian Youth Movement came together in its defence; in East London, the murders of Altab Ali, Ishaque Ali and Michael Ferreira led to the creation of various local black movements concentrating on self-defence.

In the fight for the right to self-defence three other trials are important to remember for the key issues that each highlighted.

The Virk brothers, mentioned above, were sentenced in July 1978 by Judge Michael Argyle to between three months and seven years imprisonment. Not only were these sentences savage, but the whole case rested on the police version of events. The brothers had, in fact, been the victims of racial attack and racial abuse and had defended themselves under severe provocation. It was they who called the police, but the police then arrested the brothers, whilst the (real) attackers went free. Judge Argyle condemned as 'irrelevant' the introduction by the defence of racial prejudice as a motivation of the white youths. After a protracted campaign the brothers' sentences were reduced on appeal, implying that the self-defence element should have been taken into account.

The next key case was that of the Ahmads in Manchester, who in July 1978 were set upon in their home by seven white men who vandalised the house. Mr Ahmad and his son tried to defend the family, not realising, as in the case of the Newham 8, that the men were plain-clothes police. The father and son were arrested and charged with "wounding with intent to do grievous bodily harm" and with assaulting police officers. After a vigorous community-based campaign, they were finally acquitted of all charges.



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