

# Fighting racism: Brick Lane, September 1978

By Tom Macara

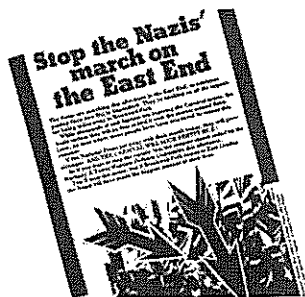
**R**UAH Carlyle [WL35] told the story of Cable Street, 1936, and how the Stalinist CP, which ever afterwards falsely claimed credit for the fascist defeat in the East End, actually started by telling its members to go to a Spanish Civil War rally in Trafalgar Square instead. A remarkably similar series of events occurred in East London four decades later, in September 1978, when fascists marched into the Bengali areas of East London. The role the CP played in 1936, only far, far worse, was played in 1978 by people calling themselves Trotskyists.

The organisations of the black community in East London had appealed to the labour movement for support in stopping a Nazi march on their area, planned for 30 September 1978. Hundreds of socialists responded. But Sunday 30 September was also the date set for an Anti-Nazi League rock concert at Brockwell Park, south London. Seeing the carnival and the great possibilities for organisational self-promotion as the most important thing, the then large, broad-front Anti-Nazi League, led by the Socialist Workers Party and backed by the International Marxist Group and the Communist Party, refused. They said in effect: "No, there's not much we can do, we've got a concert organised which mustn't be spoiled."

The ANL leadership — that is, primarily, the SWP — was given conclusive proof of the NF's intended march by *Searchlight* magazine a month in advance. They concealed the fact. As late as Friday 15 September, the ANL said that they still had no reason to believe the documents were genuine; they were investigating. The IMG [today, Socialist Action and Socialist Outlook] asserted that in their view the Front march was a hoax. But even if it were genuine, any attempt to mobilise people in defence of the East End would be "a diversion" from the Carnival. The thing that really mattered was the Carnival! Their central concern was to suck up to the SWP, which they were then propositioning about 'unity'. The following Tuesday, 19 September — after the ANL had promised to send its East London membership to defend Bengali Brick Lane — the IMG were still refusing to 'divert' their members.

The Hackney and Tower Hamlets Defence Committee called a press conference to assert that, with or without the ANL, a counter-demonstration would try to stop the fascists from reaching Bengali East London. There, the Socialist Campaign for a Labour Victory [a broad alliance of Labour and trade union activists initiated by *Workers' Action*, one of *Workers' Liberty*'s forerunners] announced that it was organising a national mobilisation for Brick Lane. The first issue of *Socialist Organiser*, the SCLV's paper, was rushed out early with a front page call for a mobilisation to defend Brick Lane. (Written by James Ryan, it was signed by black Hackney councillor Patrick Kodikara.)

In the following days, ANL, SWP, IMG and CP members — inside and outside the Defence Committee — strained every mus-



The leaflet with which *Socialist Organiser* supporters appealed to anti-fascists to defend Brick Lane, and the front-page call in *Socialist Organiser* no.1.



cle to prevent an effective response to the fascists. Facing intense hostility from Bengalis — and in some cases quite hysterically torn between following the line of their organisations and trying to retain some slight respect in the East End — they had shifted by the time of the stewards' meeting on Saturday evening, 29 September. The local SWP organiser promised that the ANL would after all divert many thousands of supporters from Hyde Park to Brick Lane. It did nothing of the sort. On Sunday 30 September, *Workers' Action* and SCLV supporters leafleted coaches and trains on their way to the Carnival, and were sometimes (for

example, on the Cardiff train) threatened with physical violence by SWP members, denounced as 'wreckers' and 'agents provocateurs.' In Hyde Park they distributed 20,000 leaflets calling for defence of the Bengalis. Paul Holborow (a member of the ANL Steering Committee and a leader of the SWP) announced from the platform that Brick Lane was in no danger: the police had given assurances on the question. Ernie Roberts and Arthur Scargill echoed the message: don't go, we don't want the Carnival split by 'Nazi provocation.'

In East London that day, the National Front celebrated its greatest triumph in years. Some 1,000 anti-fascists forced the police to refrain from attempting to take the Nazi march to its original destination in Redchurch Street, which leads into the top of Brick Lane itself, but, unchallenged and unmolested, they marched 1,500 strong through the City of London to Great Eastern Street in Shoreditch, "within spitting distance of Brick Lane", as NF leader Richard Verrall gloatingly put it. Meanwhile, there were up to 100,000 at the Anti-Nazi League Carnival in Brockwell Park!

Largest among the contingents in defence of Brick Lane were Bengalis organised by the local youth movements; *Workers' Action* and the Socialist Campaign for a Labour Victory; the Black Socialist Alliance, and detachments from the smaller Trotskyist groups. The remainder of the Brick Lane defence was made up of groups and individuals from anti-racist committees and the socialist organisations, including East London ANL, SWP and IMG. But these forces were not sufficiently cohesive and, crucially, nothing like big enough to take the initiative.

After the Nazi rally dispersed, groups of fascists began prowling the area. One gang of 50-60 thugs got through to Brick Lane and smashed up an Asian shop before being driven off. In several Underground trains and stations, black people and anti-fascists were attacked by cock-a-hoop National Front bullies. The hugely boosted morale of the Front led to an escalation of racist assaults in the area. What could have been a tremendous victory for anti-fascism, with every street crossing into the East End held, was forced to be a defiant but inadequate showing at one street corner, while the fascists marched and rallied with impunity. As I said above: it was like the CP's initial approach to Cable Street 42 years earlier. Except that the CP changed its line in time to mobilise against Mosley. The SWP, IMG and CP in 1978 did not do that.