

Interview with Kojo Barbah from South London Anti-Fascists and the Anti-Raids Network

Anarchist Affinity

July 26, 2014

Kojo Barbah is a London based activist and a founding member of South London Anti-Fascists. He is also a member of the direct action migrant solidarity organisation the Anti-Raids Network.

Maybe we can begin by discussing the origins of South London Anti-Fascists (SLAF). Though London is a city with a long, continuous and quite notorious history of anti-fascist organising, SLAF only came to my attention last year, in the wake of the murder of British soldier Lee Rigby in Woolwich on May 22nd. How and when did the group come together? Was the decision to reactivate the group out of mere necessity, in response to far-right attempts to capitalise on Rigby's death, or were there other factors?

South London Anti-Fascists were originally formed by trade unionists in 2008, namely Battersea and Wandsworth Trade Union Council and Croydon Trade Union Council. It was in reaction to the London Mayor and Assembly elections, which returned the highest proportional vote for the fascist British National Party (5%) in London and guaranteed them a seat in the Assembly. The vote, though overall still small, was acutely concentrated in Barking and Dagenham, poor deindustrialised North East London suburbs where the BNP were made the official local council opposition with 12 elected councillors. In South London, Morden was also a flashpoint for far-right activity. In 2009, the BNP's membership was leaked and though some people on it were never fully paid up fascists there was a sizeable number in this area, including a small scaffolding business run by a fascist which still operates today. Our view was that the far right were gaining ground in traditional working class areas and the privatisation agenda pursued by Labour had abandoned and alienated working class interests. We were lucky to have a paid organiser to support our efforts. The far-right needed to be tackled using a diversity of tactics and the divided efforts of Unite Against Fascism (UAF) (predominantly SWP) and Searchlight/Hope Not Hate (HNH) were clearly not working.

Antifa at this time was at a low point as the BNP had moved away (though never completely abandoned) from street confrontation to wearing suits and appearing like professional politicians. Also, there were stories of Antifa attempting to blow up cars belonging to the wrong people and getting sent down for it. SLAF worked initially as a collective where HNH, UAF and autonomous

antifascists could work together to organise against local threats and support individuals and communities who were targeted or concerned about local activity. We dwindled in activity as the threat of the BNP receded after 2010. The EDL emerged as a new threat and the UK Independence Party, though marginal, were in the background. I was the chair and my political orientation was changing too. I moved from a democratic socialist orientation to a more social anarchist position. During our down period, I read a lot more!

Lee Rigby's death definitely prompted a reactivation. I personally got a lot of calls asking what should be organised as the then leader of the EDL, Tommy Robinson, was coming to Woolwich. We were disorganised and too small in number to respond so initially we had to watch him on TV unopposed. A meeting was called by a prominent local anarchist a day later and I suggested using the SLAF banner as it happened in our patch. We made a callout to confront the EDL outside Downing Street and have started to hold regular meetings ever since.

Organised antifascists like Anti-Fascist Action (1985–1990's) and the contemporary Anti-Fascist Network have stressed, alongside the necessity of counter mobilisation and confrontation on the streets, the importance of 'filling the political vacuum'. This type of counter analysis generally consists of a class-struggle critique of capitalism, but often extends to critiques of the state, political liberalism and nationalism. SLAF seems to take this responsibility very seriously, and argues persuasively that struggles against all other forms of oppression (ubiquitous police harassment and violence inflicted upon communities of colour through policies like the Met Police's 'Stop and SEARCH'; the targeting of sex workers in Soho; 'raids' by the UK Border Force targeting migrant workers and asylum seekers to name but a few) are also antifascist activities. Can you elaborate on this connection?

There isn't unanimity in our group on this, we have Trotskyists and some who avoid political labels but this is the majority view.

Anti-fascism, bluntly, is stopping fascists from growing either in number or in confidence at the very least. At the maximum it is dismantling their capacity to be effective. Liberal antifascists believe antifascists are bad because they are illiberal and pay only lip service to parliamentary democracy. We oppose fascists because they seek our complete domination by exterminating working class power.

When we reformed, we wanted to express our beliefs about the nature of fascism and the state. Fascism is the ultimate expression of capitalism's need to control and subordinate human activity to its logic and authority. The state is its most effective tool. When societies are failed by capital, the preferred solution is state repression. However in liberal democracies, unlike military dictatorships, repression cannot be nakedly deployed, apologetics are utilised to explain the contradiction of affirming human rights and the exercising of sub-human treatment. The law is the crystallisation of this – the targeting of minorities, whether it is asylum seekers, cultural groups or sex workers is the State practicing and perfecting its power to oppress. The more we allow this to happen, the better the police get at wielding it, the more polished politicians are at arguing for dehumanisation, and the more efficient media outlets are in convincing the public. We oppose state repression because it is antithesis of our power, which is our solidarity. We want to bring together the full spectrum of our human expression against state oppression. Capital, through the state, wants to divide and categorise us into economic utilities and human resources.

Fascism is capitalism unrestrained by historical appeals to morality or universal rights. The popular appeal of this doesn't happen overnight, but is a culture that can take decades, or in times

of crisis, a few years to develop and become entrenched. If we do not resist state oppression then we allow the tools of our destruction to sharpen and be ready to put into fascist control.

In an excellent piece published on the SLAF blog in May, you identify the predominance of ‘populist’ anti-immigrant rhetoric in the run-up to the European elections as a reason ‘antifascism is necessary but insufficient’, adding ‘in our analysis, the state is a much bigger threat and generator of popular racism’ (than UKIP, BNP etc). This is an observation with great relevance in the Australian context, where social justice campaigns often ignore structural issues, instead focusing on appeals to politicians, commentators and the state to be nicer, more compassionate and less racist. Given Australia’s role as a global pioneer of mandatory detention of asylum seekers, and the fact that much of this infrastructure was built by the Australian Labor Party, this too seems insufficient. How does SLAF identify the role of the state in creating, exploiting and perpetuating racism? Any thoughts about organising outside of borders and against the state?

Australia’s legacy of white supremacy is an outpost of British imperialism. The policy of White Australia may have been publicly restrained by the British but it was tacitly endorsed and clearly financed. In managing a global empire, Britain has learned to be less explicit about its racial hierarchy but it is clearly a deeply embedded part of British culture.

We as a group have not theorised how the state has created racism, but the works of Walter Rodney, Theodore W. Allen and bell hooks would illuminate here. I believe that racism was an imperialist construct invented to justify enslavement, genocide and subjugation of darker skinned peoples and their cultures. It is necessary for imperial capitalist accumulation to continue and allay moral qualms about inhuman treatment. If they are not human, went the theory, then it was justified.

It also helped and still does help the ruling elite manage class relations. Nationalism and whiteness create a powerful collective identity that politicians use to generate a sense of pride and superiority amongst the white working class. Invoking whiteness, however subtly, signals that to be white is to be associated with being the dominator not the dominated, to be part of the history of Kings and Queens not the enslaved and impoverished, and that they are heirs to the pioneers of democracy and modernity and not savagery and barbarism. This is a myth of course, but it is said or inferred so often that it is widely believed. Even if racial myths based on biology have waned, they have transferred seamlessly into cultural myths. These ideas underlie why immigration controls are popular. They refer to the mortal danger that their biology or now culture may be irreparably damaged by the contamination of foreign bodies.

These myths aid class relations for the ruling class in another way, as they can form powerful associations to aid labour discipline. The welfare scrounger is the class equivalent of the asylum seeker. In other words, a pariah, a human to legitimately loathed. The stereotypical connotations of being Black, that is to be lazy, unable to organise your own affairs, scheming, preferring base pleasures to self-improvement and lacking a “decent” disposition provides a basis for reducing state social subsidy and weakening the power of organised labour. Racism and class hatred are interrelated, it is difficult to deploy one without making reference to the other. In breaking down these myths, we require socialisation, solidarity and struggle. Racial myths have been largely destroyed by the act of racialised people fighting to be recognised as human and white working class people living and working with racialised people and accepting that reality.

South London Anti-Fascists is part of the UK wide Anti-Fascist Network and the London based Anti Raids Network.

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