

# STEPHEN LAWRENCE MURDER -

## How socialists and the local community fought back against racism and the BNP

On 3 January 2012 Gary Dobson and David Norris were found guilty of the horrific murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence and sentenced to life imprisonment. Stephen was murdered almost 19 years ago in a racist attack by a white gang in south London.

Media coverage after the trial has focussed on the issues which emerged after the murder - such as institutionalised police racism and police incompetence, and how much has changed since. But there has been little mention of the presence of the far-right racist British National Party (BNP) in the area at the time and also the united community and trade union anti-racist campaign to drive them out.

Lois Austin, (pictured right, speaking) then a leading activist in Youth Against Racism in Europe (YRE) and the Labour Party Young Socialists, whose branches initiated the campaign, spoke to the Socialist:

“Firstly I want to pay testament to the Lawrence family and how strong and tough they’ve been to see it through this far. It is galling to see parts of the British establishment and the right-wing media, such as the Daily Mail, lauding the Lawrence family. At the time most of the British establishment turned its back on the family and the justice system didn’t deliver for them and neither did local politicians.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s YRE was involved in a local campaign that eventually closed the racist BNP’s headquarters in Welling.

Immediately after Stephen’s murder we made appeals to Bexley council and the press to help get the BNP out because it was the BNP’s divisive campaigns that were leading to an increase in racism and racist attacks in the area.

The media has also been almost completely silent on the mass protests that took place after Stephen Lawrence was murdered.

Much has been said about the Lawrence family being left isolated and alone and they were by most of the political and media establishment, but that was not the case when it came to support from ordinary people. Thousands came out onto the streets to show their anger at the murder and their support for the family.

In May 1993, just a few weeks after Stephen Lawrence was murdered, over 8,000 joined a demo called by

YRE and others - including Panther, the black socialist organisation. Mainly local young people, black and white, marched past the BNP HQ demanding that something must be done to rid our area of these racists.

A few months after that, on 16 October, YRE, the Anti-Nazi League and other organisations and trade unions called another march. We wanted to go past the BNP HQ but the riot police wouldn’t let us. Nonetheless 60,000 of us marched through the town centre. Everyone saw and understood the link between BNP activity in south east London and the racist attacks and racist murders - not just of Stephen Lawrence - three other young black men had been killed since the BNP moved in to Welling in 1987.

Greenwich council published statistics that showed a 200% increase in racist attacks in the few years that the BNP had been active in Welling, recruiting young people, giving out racist literature and using their HQ as a base.

The Greenwich and Bexley Labour Party Young Socialists (LPYS) had set up a campaign against the BNP in 1987 with support from a number of left Labour councillors and trade union branches.

But Bexley Tory council refused to listen; they told us to ‘ignore them and they’ll go away’. Yet in 1987 we pointed to the danger that their campaigns would lead to and, unfortunately, we were right.

The BNP moved in to south east



The Youth Against Racism in Europe (YRE) and Panther platform in Welling, May 1993 photo R. Newton

London during the Thatcher government, a time of high unemployment, of the cheap labour Youth Training Schemes (YTS), and, overall, a bleak future for young people. They began a systematic campaign based on a small minority of racists; they preyed on young people, visiting youth clubs to try and whip up racism.

But after Stephen Lawrence’s murder thousands of local people came out onto the streets and said ‘enough is enough’. We had launched a campaign around ‘jobs and homes not racism’. We went into youth clubs to talk to young people about the YTS, the lack of opportunities for young people, etc, and we were able to cut across the BNP’s growth.

In 1994 a planning inquiry into the use of the BNP HQ in Welling was set up. This was the establishment’s way of recognising that they had to act without conceding that they were closing it down because of mass pressure.

YRE wrote a submission which proved that it was not just an innocuous ‘bookshop’ but a party HQ. The second point we set out to prove, since it was a planning inquiry, was that incitement to racial hatred was relevant to planning law because it was of detriment to the community and the environment. The YRE evidence was cited in the summary.

### Institutionalised racism

Stephen’s murder trial has exposed some appalling things about the police. Outrageously both Stephen and the friend who was with him at the time of his murder, Duwayne Brooks, were treated as criminals instead of being treated as victims. And then there was a completely bungled police inquiry.

My family knew people in the Eltham area and Welling who said that the police knocked on their door once, asked a few questions, said they’d be coming back and never did. Why was there not a vigorous inquiry?

All sorts of things have gone on which, quite frankly, are outrageous and show that at the root of this was, and still is, a degree of deep-seated racism within the Metropolitan Police. It’s that and the racism in the political establishment that has meant we’ve had to wait 18 years for justice.

However, there have been some steps forward. The campaign of the Lawrence family and all their supporters, campaigns of groups like YRE and others and the fact that they were steadfast and that police racism has been exposed mean it’s more difficult for the police to repeat such a miscarriage of justice.

But young black men continue to die in police custody and there’s still terrible outrages being committed by the police. There’s still a big job to do. The riots in August showed the anger and resentment of many, many young black people in London and elsewhere; they’re much more likely to be stopped and searched. So while I think a step forward has been made there’s still a long way to go.

And there is still a danger from racist groups like the English Defence League (EDL).

Anxiety exists in white working class communities over jobs and housing. That’s the result of the policies of the last Labour government and the Con-Dems. In the late 1980s in order to cut across the BNP we ran a very successful ‘jobs and homes not racism’ campaign. And don’t forget that the successful anti-poll tax campaign was around that time too.

We used those campaigns to go out into the community and to unite black, Asian, white people in a campaign on the social and economic issues that affected everybody. We said the BNP doesn’t have any solutions, the BNP are not fighting for you, we’re fighting for you and we need to fight together.

And really it’s the same sort of campaign that we need to day. Defend jobs, homes and services - not racism, not blaming immigrants for

social ills, but blaming the capitalist crisis and the profit system and the politicians of all the three main parties. These establishment politicians support austerity and more cuts and more attacks on the living standards of the working class.

### Exploitative system

The idea, that was suggested to black youth in Eltham in the 1990s, that all you need is a few key black and Asian people in the police force or in parliament to emancipate and heal the social and economic deprivation that exists and challenge racism, is absolute rubbish.

We need to fight the cuts and improve things for everybody. But also we need to remove the institutions that are inherently racist and maintain the status quo. No matter how many black people you get elected as Tory MPs the Tories will always be a party that has, as part of its repertoire, a racist programme. They do it by whipping up racism around asylum laws and immigration, or when they talk about the so-called criminality of the black community. It is they who divide and rule as a way of maintaining their power.

The Labour Party is no longer rooted in working class communities but accepts austerity and the neoliberal agenda. It was their policies and lack of investment in working class communities which led to the growth of the BNP in some areas when they were in government.

One of the tasks of the anti-racist movement is to link up with trade unionists and socialists and build a new, mass working class party. But I would also say that while the unjust, exploitative, and corrupt capitalist system remains, racism and the far right will always exist.

To eradicate racism and prejudice, and to remove the conditions that allow the far-right to grow, capitalism must be replaced by a socialist society.”



photo Militant

# THE UNTOLD STORY

## Anuj Bidve murder condemned by local community

Anuj Bidve, a post-graduate student at Lancaster University was murdered on Boxing Day in Ordsall, Salford. The police have charged a local 20 year-old youth with the murder, which they are treating as a hate crime.

Socialist Party and Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) supporters took part in a vigil for Anuj on 2 January which drew 600 people, mostly local residents. People in Ordsall wanted to make clear their revulsion at the murder. They totally reject gun crime and racial crime, despite disgraceful media reports attempting to slur the whole of Ordsall and by extension working class communities in general.

The vigil was fronted by local churches but after a Hindu prayer had been said there was no statement or speeches from the organisers. After half an hour of struggling to keep candles alight people started to drift away; this was a lost opportunity for a community lead against gun crime and racism.

At a social event held immediately after the vigil, which could have begun to encourage discussion and heal wounds, there was a quite disproportionate police presence, including police horses at the door, which people found so intimidating that very few attended.

A South Asian member of the Socialist Party, who lives on the estate, commented: "Before the incident you rarely saw community police, mostly police in cars on the main road. Now there are police on every street corner, but they'll probably be gone in another week.

"Since the incident there is fear on the streets. I'm scared of other young people, but they also look scared of me! We need something to bring people together."

### Motion passed by Salford Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition on 5 January

*"This meeting wishes to express its horror and revulsion at the murder of Anuj Bidve in Salford on Boxing Day, and express heartfelt condolences to his friends and family..."*

*We feel there is no place for guns in our communities and while we support sensitive community policing we question the disproportionate police presence which has emerged since this tragic incident.*

*We condemn sensationalist reporting in sections of the media, which used a possible racial motive in the murder of Anuj to disgracefully portray the whole community as thugs and racists.*

*We call for a democratic public meeting to be held on Ordsall estate at an appropriate time, involving representatives of Ordsall residents' organisations... and trade unions, where the relevant city council services and the police should answer the questions and demands of local people to determine how the community can be protected from gun crime and live in peace.*

*We believe it is essential that the police are accountable for their actions and that the community receives the policing that it needs and wants. We reiterate our opposition to the cuts and closures of community and youth facilities, and the lack of affordable housing, and demand the council acts to address these issues."*

### Salford TUSC selects trade unionist and community activist candidate

Salford TUSC confirmed that our candidate George Tapp will fight the Ordsall ward in May 2012. Last year George came second only to Labour, winning 16% of the vote. George has lived on the Ordsall estate all his life. He is a trade unionist in Unite, an activist with Salford Pensioners and Salford against Cuts, and he has consistently attended the sparks' (electricians) protests in Manchester and London.

George's campaign will address many issues concerning the Ordsall community as well as gun crime - eg the absence of affordable housing and a future for local youth. We see the opulence of the BBC's new Media City on our doorstep while the Labour council plan the closure of Ordsall's Humphrey Booth Day Centre for elderly and disabled people, along with two others in Salford.

Speaking after his selection George said: "The council are attacking the most vulnerable people in our society. You'd expect it off a Tory council, this proves how right-wing the Labour council has become. Salford Unison are fighting these closures and I, along with Salford Pensioners, will be backing them 100%."

Paul Gerrard

The Daily Mail claims much of the credit for encouraging the police to pursue Stephen Lawrence's killers but is prone to the type of sensationalist and bigoted headlines and reporting which fuel racism and reinforces division in society. Soon after Stephen's murder a Daily Mail editorial had attacked anti-racist campaigners: "What is not helpful is the gusto with which the more militant of the anti-racist organisations have hijacked this human tragedy... is there not also something contemptible about professional protesters who capitalise on grief to fuel confrontation?"



photo Paul Mattsson

While racial prejudice is less acceptable today than in 1993, as Doreen Lawrence said: "The fact is that racism and racist attacks are still happening ... and the police should not use my son's name to say that we can still move on."

- In 2010 there were a reported 40,000 race hate crimes
- Black people are 26 times more likely than white people to be stopped and searched by the police



Various protests and lobbies against the BNP in 1993 photos A.Gilmour, T.Bolwell, Militant, D.Sinclair