

British fascism: Routed on the streets

Sun, 15/03/1998 - 17:38

Sir Oswald Mosley, MP, split from Labour to form the New Party in March 1931, together with a group of left MPs. By October 1932 Mosley had transformed the party into the British Union of Fascists. Paul Morris recounts the events that led to his movement's defeat.

Oswald Mosley started out as a Tory and was, by background, a rich aristocrat. But he clashed with the Conservatives over Ireland in the early 1920s. Inside the Labour Party, Mosley fought for a traditional Labour left programme. But the New Party was explicitly non-socialist.

Defeat at the 1931 General Election, growing economic crisis and a visit to Mussolini in Italy pushed Mosley towards creating an open fascist movement in mid-1932.

Mosley posed a real threat. He had money to spare, charisma, capable lieutenants in the shape of a dozen former socialist organisers who stayed with him to found the British Union of Fascists (BUF), as well as complex ties with the capitalist establishment.

Between October 1932 and June 1934 the BUF grew rapidly. Mosley contributed at least £100,000 to enable it to employ 150 full-time staff. He rented a barracks in Kings Road, Chelsea where 200 BUF paramilitaries drilled and trained in blackshirt uniforms.

In addition, the BUF attracted moral and financial backing from several key industrial capitalists. Mosley's most prominent supporter was press baron, Lord Rothermere, whose Daily Mail splashed the infamous headline 'Hurrah for the Blackshirts' on 15 January 1934. He was also backed by Vickers' boss, Lord Armstrong, car magnate Sir William Morris and extremist Tories.

Fascism plays a specific role for the ruling class: it is a weapon of last resort against workers' revolution when all else fails. When even the army, police and security services cannot contain the workers' movement, the capitalists have to call on a mass reactionary movement. To build such a movement they have to delve into the 'lower classes' using a mixture of crude economic radicalism and racism and they have to control the streets.

Crisis

Despite the severe recession of the early 1930s, the economic crisis did not mature into a revolutionary one. What bosses like Morris, Rothermere and Armstrong wanted was a strong, right-wing authoritarian movement that could act as an auxiliary to the police in the event of general strike.

Mosley cut himself adrift from the mainstream ruling class when, in early 1934, he launched a struggle for street supremacy in key working class areas. The Labour leaders urged workers to ignore Mosley. But working class socialists in the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and Communist Party (CP) recognised the BUF as a real threat: the fight against fascism in Britain was on.

Local historian Nigel Todd gives a vivid account of the BUF's attempt to take on the workers' movement

in Tyneside in 1934 in his book *In Excited Times*. The CP's Newcastle bookshop was smashed up. Fascist open-air meetings were held at marketplaces in Newcastle and Sunderland, protected by uniformed blackshirts.

The BUF then tried to attack an ILP rally outside a dole office on May Day 1934 and got battered by the angry crowd. Todd writes:

By threatening a May Day meeting . . . the BUF unwittingly produced an entirely new situation. Instead of responding to fascist violence the strategy of anti-fascism on Tyneside now changed to one of completely breaking the BUF.

On 10 May the Newcastle Anti-Fascist League was formed. It consisted of 200 uniformed defence stewards (almost exclusively working class and fifty per cent of that out of work), according to one participant. Street battles in Newcastle and Gateshead on 13 and 14 May decisively changed the situation.

Workers turned out in their thousands to prevent fascist demonstrations. The fascists were penned into their Newcastle HQ by the angry crowd. As one fascist wrote: 'The large branch room, with its floor covered in blood and groaning men, was a gruesome sight'.

Throughout this period, the Labour leadership and the union leaders (as well as many local Labour branches) urged the workers to stay away from anti-fascist demos. In March 1933, straight after Hitler seized power in Germany, the Labour leaders issued the statement that 'Communist dictatorship, or fear of it, has led to fascist dictatorship'.

But rank and file workers ensured that the Tyneside experience was repeated all over Britain: the workers' movement was waking up to the danger of fascism and learning that, to defeat it, they had to smash it physically as well as providing a socialist answer to the politics of despair it offered.

Nationally, June 1934 proved a turning point for the BUF because of one high-profile event: the Olympia Rally of 7 June. Thousands of blackshirts and far-right Tories filled the Olympia exhibition hall in London. In a well planned counter-demo the Communist Party surrounded the hall with thousands of anti-fascists and also infiltrated the proceedings.

The police, while struggling to contain the crowds outside, used an archaic legal loophole to justify staying outside the hall. The result, as described by one far-right Tory, 'looked like a Russian pogrom'. Every few minutes squads of fascist stewards jumped on the protesters and beat them senseless, in the full glare of the spotlights Mosley had ordered for the occasion.

Olympia was a bloody setback for the anti-fascists. But newsreel film was shown all over Britain, rousing millions of workers to reject the Labour Party line of 'ignore Mosley'. Meanwhile, Mosley's Tory sympathisers were appalled. Many quietly slipped away, including all the BUF's high-profile industrial backers.

Olympia has gone down in history as the watershed for the BUF. But history has ignored the struggles, such as those in Newcastle, replicated in Glasgow and the Welsh valleys, which actually did the decisive damage to the BUF as a street-level movement.

After being routed at the General Election of November 1935, Mosley returned to street politics (this time concentrating his forces against the Jewish population of East London). Mosley had failed in a frontal assault on the working class areas; now he tried a 'divide and rule' strategy, realising that successful fascist movements 'divide then rule' the working class.

Major confrontations followed in 1936 in Tonypany, Oxford and at London's Albert Hall. In each case the police subjected the anti-fascists to brutal attacks. The culmination of the BUF's attempted revival came in London's East End between August and October 1936.

During these three months the BUF drenched the streets of East London with a sustained campaign of racist intimidation. The three London boroughs of Stepney, Shoreditch and Bethnal Green contained 60% of the UK's Jewish population. Of these, half lived in the overcrowded and poverty-stricken borough of Stepney.

The working class Jews of the East End were to be the scapegoats in Mosley's plan. Constant street propaganda was his method. A mass confrontation with, and victory over, the workers' organisations was his goal.

It is important to point out here that, contrary to the impression given by Channel Four's lamentable drama series, anti-semitism played an important part in the BUF's propaganda from the word go. But it is true that Mosley emphasised anti-semitism after his first attempt to smash the left in the industrial areas was defeated.

After a sustained three-month racist campaign Mosley announced his master stroke. There was to be a mass fascist parade through the East End, with Mosley 'reviewing the Blackshirt troops' who would proceed to four open air meetings. The date was set for Sunday 4 October. The fascists were challenging the East End working class to a showdown. And that is what they got.

The full details of the Battle of Cable Street have been recounted in many places. Mosley's 3,000 stormtroops formed up near Tower Bridge, protected by 6,000 police. Against them was a crowd estimated at between 300,000 and half a million - mainly London workers, including the vast majority of the Jews of the East End.

Tram drivers disabled their trams to block the way. People armed themselves with billiard queues, marbles (to bring down police horses), bricks and the contents of chamber pots. At three out of four of the defensive points designated by the anti-fascists, the police were repulsed.

At a fourth, Cable Street, a running battle developed with workers overturning a lorry to form a barricade, ripping up paving slabs for missiles and eventually sending the police into bloody retreat. By mid-afternoon, Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Sir Philip Game, ordered Mosley to abandon the march. The Blackshirts marched through the deserted financial district of the City and then dispersed. The East End, meanwhile, turned into one big party.

Cable Street was a decisive turning point. In November 1936 the National Government brought in the Public Order Act, banning uniformed street demos and paramilitary organisations and establishing the right of police to enter public meetings. Many on the left, including the Labour Party and TUC leaders, had called for the fascists to be banned and now welcomed the three month ban on demonstrations in London instituted under the new act.

But it soon became clear that the left itself was the main target. The 'three month ban' on blackshirt marches in the East End was renewed every three months between 1936 and the outbreak of war in 1939. Anti-fascists consistently found themselves on the receiving end of police brutality as the ban was extended to all 'extremist' activity.

Meanwhile, as the first anniversary of Cable Street approached, Mosley planned another march - from Westminster to Bermondsey in south east London. But the workers rallied once again, blocking the

fascists' path at Borough High Street with a crowd estimated at more than 100,000.

Attitude

Between 1936 and 1939 a split broke out within the ruling class over its attitude to Hitler and Mussolini. A powerful faction around former King Edward VIII who abdicated in 1936 partly as a result of the split wanted appeasement with Nazi Germany as a protection against Russia and the threat of revolution. Paradoxically, this network of fascist sympathisers within the ruling class now worked overtime to distance themselves from the BUF, whose attraction was diminished as the true scale of Nazi repression in Germany, and fascist Spain and Italy, was revealed.

By 1940, when Mosley and a hard core of BUF members were imprisoned for supporting Germany at war with Britain, the fascist movement was a spent force.

There is a strong cultural tradition that says 'the English are too mild for fascism'. George Orwell, the ILP member and Spanish Civil War veteran, propounded this wrong theory throughout World War Two.

There is nothing in the 'national character' of Britain that guards against a turn to murderous fascist reaction. If the British ruling class failed to reach for the fascist weapon in the mid-1930s it was because the crisis never reached the depths that it did in Italy, Germany and Spain.

Anti-fascists

At the same time, however, the working class struggle against fascism injected its own logic. If the workers of Glasgow, the Valleys and Newcastle had not chased Mosley off the streets in 1934; if hundreds of anti-fascists had not got themselves hospitalised at Olympia; and if Mosley had made it down Cable Street, the workers' organisations would have been all the weaker. And the fascists would have grown in strength.

Mosley was weakened by the failure of an economic crisis to develop into revolutionary crisis. He was also weakened by his own tactical ineptness and personal philandering, amply illustrated in the Channel Four series. All these things weakened Mosley: but he was beaten by the working class.

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