Bridging the Gap: The British Communist Party and the limits of the state in tackling racism

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Since the 1960s, many involved in anti-racist campaigning in Britain had argued that any positive action that the institutions of the state (such as the police, the judiciary and the Home Office) could take to combat racism would be hindered by the racism that was pervasive within these institutions. Many on the left, in the anti-racist movement and within Britain's black communities had criticised Lord Scarman for his statement in his 1981 Inquiry into the Brixton riots that '"Institutional racism" does not exist in Britain'[1] and this denial of institutional racism, which was prevalent in the thinking of the Government at the time, left many radical activists within the anti-racist movement unwilling to be involved in any state-related anti-racist activities. However the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), as a large and influential body within the British labour movement, was an important radical organisation, which sought to work with the state in anti-racist campaigning. This stemmed from a strategy of working within a parliamentary democratic framework and establishing a broad left alliance, which would involve many trade union and Labour Party members, who may not be willing to take any radical actions. This article will examine how the CPGB appeared to counter the radical trend amongst anti-racist campaigners and how they attempted to work with the institutions of the state, primarily in campaigning for the enforcement of the Race Relations Act. This article will look at the problematic position the CPGB found itself in by trying to maintain its broad left alliance while criticising racism within the labour movement and the limitations of appealing to the state to be the decisive force in combating racism. The CPGB's balancing act between a reformist and revolutionary strategy for tackling racial discrimination, by trying to involve both the state and its hostile critics, gives an insight into how difficult it can be for

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[1] Lord Scarman,   *The Scarman Report: The Brixton Disorders 10-12 April 1981* (Harmondsworth, 1986) p. 209.

progressives to attempt to combat racism through the institutions of the state without their agendas being reduced to a very limited scope.

Marxism and the state

The idea of co-operation with the institutions of the state for the Communist Party took a long time to develop as the CPGB's outlook relied heavily upon the traditional Marxist-Leninist concept of the state. The traditional Marxist-Leninist idea of the state stems from the concept that the state functions as the political (and often coercive) arm of the ruling class and their economic interests. This concept relies on a passage in *The Communist Manifesto*, which claims that '[t]he executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie'.[2] Although there has been wide debate over the autonomy and the role of the state, Ralph Miliband states that this is the 'classical Marxist view on the subject' and 'the only one which is to be found in Marxism-Leninism'.[3] If the state exists to protect the economic interests of the ruling class and acts, as Lenin describes, 'an instrument for the exploitation of the oppressed class',[4] Marxist-Leninists have long believed that acting within existing political structures cannot threaten the dominance of the bourgeoisie. Marx had warned in *The Civil War in France* that 'the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes'.[5] Citing Marx, Lenin proclaimed that the proletariat had to seize power and usurp the institutions of the capitalist state, writing that 'the working class must *break up, smash* the "ready-made state machinery," and not confine itself merely to laying hold of it.'[6] For Lenin, the proletarian revolution, based on the Paris Commune of 1871 and the October Revolution of 1917, and the 'suppression of the bourgeois state' was 'impossible without a violent revolution'.[7] For a long time, this concept formed the basis of the Communist Party of Great Britain's political outlook.

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[2] Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London, 2002) p. 221.
[3] Ralph Miliband, *Class Power and State Power* (London, 1983) p. 9.
[4] V.I. Lenin, *The state and Revolution* (Peking, 1973) p. 13.
[5] Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France* (Moscow, 1974) p. 50.
[6] Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, p. 44; Italics are in the original text.
[7] Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, p. 25.

In the inter-war period, the Communist Party's strategy was outlined in *For Soviet Britain*. This programme saw socialism as unobtainable through reforming the capitalist system and rejected any attempts to build socialism without a total break with the present capitalist order, based on the Bolshevik model of armed insurrection. The programme asserted the necessity of the forcible overthrow of capitalism and for 'democratic Workers' Councils to exercise a severe dictatorship over the defeated capitalist class'.[8] This programme was in contrast to the practical actions of the Communist Party during the periods of 1934-1939 and 1941-1945, when the Popular Front line was being directed from Moscow. For the CPGB, the Popular Front strategy promoted co-operation with the bourgeoisie and other moderate organisations to defeat fascism at home and internationally. The CPGB envisaged the Popular Front strategy as a *defensive* alliance with the bourgeoisie against fascism and was not a complete rejection of insurrectionism, but the Party's interaction with other progressive movements impacted upon its political outlook, which saw a slow evolution towards the acceptance of a peaceful transition to socialism through parliamentary democracy.

In 1951, the CPGB published *The British Road to Socialism*, which put forward the Party's strategy for the establishment of socialism through peaceful, democratic means, declaring that 'the people of Britain can transform capitalist democracy into a real People's Democracy, transforming Parliament… into the democratic instrument of the will of the vast majority of her people'.[9] *The British Road to Socialism* envisaged the transition to a socialist society coming through the parliamentary system and gaining support for the socialist cause by democratic means through co-operation with the Labour left for a Labour-Communist alliance. With *The British Road to Socialism*, the Communist Party accepted working for a Labour Government that could implement reforms within the capitalist system, using the state to introduce and maintain these reforms, but acknowledged 'a reformist Labour Government is not the same thing as a Socialist Government'.[10]

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[8] CPGB, *For Soviet Britain* (London, 1935) p. 27.
[9] CPGB, *The British Road to Socialism* (London, 1951) p. 14.
[10] CPGB, *The British Road to Socialism* (London, 1958) p. 13.

This strategy had a major impact upon the Communist Party's anti-racist strategies. As part of the struggle against racism, alongside education initiatives, activism in the workplace and grassroots community activities, the Party demanded that the state should act to combat racial discrimination and to prevent the racist violence and intimidation of the fascist far right, calling for legislation, such as Race Relations Act, to be used effectively. While the Party looked to the state to play a positive role in the struggle against racism, many institutions of the state, particularly the police, the judiciary and the immigration control system, were afflicted with institutional racism and exacerbated mistrust between Britain's black communities and the state. The problem was that the demand to use legislation to fight racism, which was made in most of the Party's anti-racist literature, relied on using the state apparatuses that they believed were still dominated by the interests of the ruling class and that seemed unwilling to make significant challenges to the pervasive racial discrimination in British society.

The Race Relations Acts

Throughout the post-war era, the Communist Party supported the campaign for racial discrimination to be outlawed. The Race Relations Act was first passed in 1965, then amended in 1968 and 1976, but it had many limitations and the Party continually campaigned for it to be strengthened and enforced effectively. Throughout the Communist Party's campaign supporting the Race Relations Act, there was the acknowledgement of the limitations of legislation without wider education and efforts made at local grassroots level. 'No one would pretend that such legislation, by itself alone, would be sufficient to wipe out colour-bar practices', wrote Kay Beauchamp, 'let alone to rid people's minds of the racial ideas which more than three hundred years of capitalist rule have planted there'.[11] But it was hoped that the Act would do was 'deter those who at present practice racial discrimination' and 'restrain those… who deliberately incite racial hatred', as well as preventing 'the more open forms of their insidious propaganda'.[12]

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[11] Kay Beauchamp, 'Colour Bar', Comment, 11 January, 1964, p. 22.
[12] Beauchamp, 'Colour Bar', p. 22.

The Act had, Joan Bellamy wrote in CPGB weekly *Comment* in 1976, 'always been regarded by the anti-racialist movement as weak' and despite the continuing amendments to the Act, Bellamy asserted that the impetus still relied on 'appointed official bodies and the law to stem discrimination'.[13] To rely solely on government legislation 'ignore[d] the potential of the democratic participation of those most bitterly affected by discrimination, the black people themselves',[14] wrote Bellamy as the CPGB looked to co-operation with local community organisations to combat racism, where the Act seemed to fail. Legislation would combat direct cases of racial discrimination, but as the Party stated in July 1975, the 'ending of racial discrimination and the winning of racial equality [was] linked to the wider policies of Government relating to the economy, social services and education'.[15] The struggle against racism, while 'urgently needing special legislation', could not be divorced, in the eyes of the Communist Party, from the 'general, democratic, economic and social needs of the people as a whole'.[16] For the CPGB, this meant working for a socialist Britain, although the path to socialism was becoming an increasingly divisive topic within the Party.

By the mid-to-late 1970s, many anti-racist activists in the CPGB felt that the legislation drafted had gone as far as it could and what was needed was the application of the Act in a more diligent fashion, particularly in combating the National Front (NF) and the popular racism that it exploited as Britain fell further into economic decline during the 1970s. In a Party statement made in July 1976, the main tasks for the CPGB were defined as:

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[13] Joan Bellamy, '"Racial Discrimination": The White Paper Analysed',   *Comment*, 18 October, 1975, p. 332; p. 333.
[14] Bellamy, '"Racial Discrimination"', p. 333.
[15] CPGB Executive Committee, 'Memorandum of the Executive Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain on the Future of the Community Relations Commission and Local Community Relations Committees', 9 July, 1975, CP/LON/RACE/02/07, Labour History and Study Centre, Manchester (hereafter LHASC).
[16] CPGB EC, 'Memorandum… on the Future of the Community Relations Commission and Local Community Relations Committees'.

(1) to stop now, the growth of fascist activity;

(2) to conduct the ideological struggle against racialism and fascism;

(3) to win the working class and democratic forces for active defence of black people against discrimination;

(4) to develop a movement which generates defensive action on an ever wider scale against fascist activity and discrimination…[17]

The Party emphasised local grassroots action to counter the activities of the National Front and promoted co-operation with the black communities and other community organisations to combat racial discrimination. However the CPGB's role in the emerging anti-fascist movement was diminished, as the Party heavily relied on the state or broad-based committees to implement any action against NF, while the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) rose to prominence as an anti-fascist force, promoting a confrontational strategy of physically confronting the NF in the streets.[18]

The state and the fight against the National Front

The antagonisms between militant anti-fascists/anti-racists and the state can be traced back to the 1930s, when the Communist Party played a significant role in opposing the British Union of Fascists (BUF). This anti-fascist stance was a massive boost for the CPGB, but it also instigated the state to intervene in public demonstrations, with the introduction of the Public Order Act. Although the Act was introduced to curtail the BUF's highly provocative marches, it also severely hindered

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[17] 'Draft for Political Committee', 1 July, 1976, CP/CENT/PC/14/01, LHASC.
[18] David Evans, 'News from the Nazi Front', *International Socialism*, 1/80 (July/August 1975) p. 5.

popular action by the left.[19] In the post-war era, the Public Order Act was used by the Government to 'crack down' on Communist agitation, rather than the fascist groups, and demonstrated to the CPGB why there was need for specific legislation to be introduced to combat racial discrimination and racial hatred.

In the post-war period, the Communist Party was a leading organisation in the anti-fascist movement, but its increasing reliance upon the state was problematic. As seen with the 1936 Public Order Act, while the Government stressed that 'any legislation would apply equally to the Left as well as to the Right', in practice the state used this legislation 'almost entirely… against anti-fascist protestors'.[20] The CPGB bore the brunt of the state's zealousness to keep the status quo and as David Renton has written, the state frequently used its laws to harass the CPGB, while sympathising with the fascists.[21] From this experience, the Party demanded distinct purpose-made legislation to deal with public racist agitation and racial discrimination, rather than using the 1936 Public Order Act. In 1964, the Party declared that:

> There should be no question of amending the Public Order Act (1936) instead of introducing a Bill. The Public Order Act is an Act directed <u>against</u> the working class movement and any strengthening of it will tend to be used not against fascists, but as in the past, against anti-fascists.[22]

As the National Front grew in the 1970s, the anti-fascist movement, including the CPGB, developed the 'no platform' strategy to deny the NF venues to hold meetings or public addresses, using

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[19] Richard C. Thurlow, 'The Straw that Broke the Camel's Back Public Order, Civil Liberties and the Battle of Cable Street', in Tony Kushner & Nadia Valman, *Remembering Cable Street: Fascism and Anti-Fascism in British Society* (London, 2000) p. 74.

[20] Nigel Copsey, *Anti-Fascism in Britain* (Houndmills, 2000) p. 64; Thurlow, 'The Straw that Broke the Camel's Back', p. 91.

[21] Dave Renton, *Fascism, Anti-Fascism and Britain in the 1940s* (London, 2000) pp. 101-129

[22] London District Committee, 'Memorandum on a Bill against Racial Discrimination and Incitement', 16 December, 1964, CP/LON/RACE/01/01, LHASC.

techniques developed during the 1930s and 1940s. As well as physically combating fascist agitation in the streets, one of the major strategies was campaigning for local governments and other institutions to prevent fascists from using public places to speak or meet. After the Race Relations Act was passed, a significantly stronger case was made for state intervention against fascist agitation, but the decision to hire out meeting venues rested primarily with local authorities, becoming an issue of pressuring councils to prevent this from occurring.

The 'no platform' concept dominated anti-fascist strategy during the 1970s, supported by the Communist Party, the International Socialists (after 1976, the Socialist Workers Party) and the International Marxist Group. The CPGB were wary of the militancy of some on the far left who supported the 'no platform' position, warning that it was 'important that direct action does not become a substitute for the often more difficult task of winning the majority'.[23] 'Physical thuggery' was seen as counter-productive which created sympathy for those attacked and demonstrated 'the sort of bigotry and intolerance that alienates potential supporters'.[24] For the CPGB, the decision to deny fascists a platform should 'seek to involve the largest possible number of students' and not 'resort to individual terroristic acts'.[25]

The groups of the far left took exception to the Party's support of the 'no platform' strategy only while the current laws against incitement to race hatred were inadequate.[26] 'The "no platform" position… cannot be made dependent on the legal situation', argued the IMG's John Kilbane, reiterating that 'mass action will remain necessary'.[27] The International Socialists criticised the CPGB, who 'end[ed] up… talking of "peaceful pickets" and implying that the police can "stop the fascists"'.[28] 'For the left to call upon the police force to deal with the

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[23] *Morning Star*, 24 May, 1974.

[24] LSE CPGB Branch, 'Thuggery & Fascism & Exit of Socialism', CP/CENT/STAT/03/02, LHASC.

[25] 'The Fight Against Racialism and Fascism', CP/CENT/PC/13/05, LHASC.

[26] *Red Weekly*, 29 March, 1974.

[27] *Red Weekly*, 29 March, 1974.

[28] 'Fists Against Fascists', *International Socialism*, 1/70 (June 1974) p. 5.

fascists', it was asserted in the journal *International Socialism*, 'is to provide it with a chance to enhance its own powers for attacking the left'.[29] The 'peaceful picket, pious resolutions, rational arguments alone' would not stop the fascist threat as fascists 'have to be driven physically from the streets'.[30] Appealing to the police and the Home Office to deal with fascists, while criticising the police, seemed to reveal an inconsistency in the Communist Party's strategy, which believed the state could be utilised to counter the NF, while the police were hostile to the left and far from impartial. London District Secretary Gerry Cohen admitted in the *Morning Star*, '[t]he police, like the National Front, are on the side of the exploiting class,'[31] but still publicly called, in its congress resolutions, publications and flyers, for the state to intervene against racist activities.

In this atmosphere of confrontation and opposing the NF on the streets, the CPGB were marginalised as the momentum of the anti-fascist movement was taken up by the SWP.[32] The SWP believed that 'organised fascism had to be confronted physically',[33] and criticised the CPGB for their lack of militancy, arguing that those attracted to the NF were 'fed up with rhetoric from politicians, they are impressed by action'.[34] To prevent the building of a fascist mass movement required a strategy of 'uncompromising opposition to any form of publicity, meeting or demonstration' for the NF, which meant physically confronting the NF in the streets.[35] The SWP were wary of police protection for fascist marches, but declared that 'if five or ten thousand

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[29] 'Fists Against Fascists', p. 5.

[30] 'Fists Against Fascists', p. 5.

[31] *Morning Star*, 22 June, 1974.

[32] For further analysis of the Communist Party's relationship with the Socialist Workers Party and the Anti-Nazi League in the fight against the National Front, see: Evan Smith, 'A Bulwark Diminished? The Communist Party, the SWP and Anti-Fascism in the 1970s', *Socialist History Journal*, 35 (2009) pp. 59-80.

[33] Ian Birchall, *The Smallest Mass Party in the World* : *Building the Socialist Workers Party* (London, 1981) p. 25.

[34] 'Fascism in Leicester', *International Socialism*, 1/93 (November/December 1976) pp. 18-19.

[35] David Evans, 'News from the Nazi Front', *International Socialism*, 1/80 (July/August 1975) p. 5.

people assembled with the clear purpose of physically stopping a nazi march – then the police would probably not allow them to march'.[36]

The 'Battle of Lewisham' on August 13, 1977, when anti-fascist demonstrators clashed with the National Front and the police in the London borough of Lewisham proved otherwise and was a turning point for both the CPGB and the SWP in the anti-fascist movement. After the authorities failed to ban the NF's march, the CPGB, alongside the All Lewisham Campaign Against Racism and Fascism (ALCARAF), urged a 'powerful but peaceful demonstration', which was scheduled to take place at a different time, away from the location of the NF's march at Clifton Rise.[37] The SWP, on the other hand, announced its own demonstration at the NF's meeting point. While recognising the ALCARAF march, the SWP declared that 'it will provide no substitute for confronting the fascists directly'.[38]

On the day of the demonstration, around 4,000 people attended the ALCARAF march,[39] while around 3,000-5,000 people congregated at the SWP counter-demonstration, compared with 500-600 NF marchers,[40] where fighting broke out between police and counter-demonstrators. The SWP saw the 'Battle of Lewisham' as 'a real success',[41] while for the Communist Party, it demonstrated the need for legislation to be used effectively to ban provocative racist marches. The Party was outraged at the authorities' refusal to ban the NF march and asserted that the NF's marches 'must be stopped by police'.[42] The CPGB also condemned the 'crass adventurism' of the SWP at 'Lewisham'.[43] While the CPGB acknowledged the 'courage and determination' of those who took part in the protest at Clifton Rise, the ensuring clashes 'gave the capitalist press

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[36] 'Fascism in Leicester', p. 19.
[37] Lewisham CPGB Branch, 'ALCARAF Demonstration August 13 th', CP/LON/LEW/02/06, LHASC; Copsey, *Anti-Fascism in Britain*, p. 126.
[38] *Socialist Worker*, 13 August, 1977.
[39] Copsey, *Anti-Fascism in Britain*, p. 127.
[40] *The Guardian*, 15 August, 1977.
[41] Cited in, David Renton, *When We Touched the Sky: The Anti-Nazi League 1977-1981* (Cheltenham, 2006) p. 72.
[42] *Morning Star*, 15 August, 1977.
[43] *Morning Star*, 2 September, 1977.

the chance to present that day as being a violent struggle between two sets of "extremists"'.[44]

What the 'Battle of Lewisham' demonstrated to both the SWP and the CPGB was that people were willing to oppose the National Front, but confronting the fascists on the streets often led to confrontations with the state. What was required for a sustained campaign against the NF was not just a reactive mobilisation of anti-fascists that ended in the 'confrontation',[45] but a broad based organisation that was able to build links with many areas of British society and could promote wide-reaching propaganda to alert people to the threat of the NF. This organisation was the Anti-Nazi League (ANL), whose objective was 'to organise on the widest possible scale against the propaganda and activities of the Nazis in Britain'.[46]

Although initially wary of the ANL, due to the influence of the SWP on the organisation, the Communist Party supported the League, believing that it reflected the broad alliances outlined in *The British Road to Socialism*. In an article in *Marxism Today* in July 1978, Gideon Ben-Tovim claimed that the ANL represented the most 'imaginative and contemporary approach to anti-fascist struggle', while 'the "old left"-Tribune MPs, the Communist Party and the trade union movement - have not been major forces'.[47] This enthusiasm for the ANL, which stretched to people outside of the traditional sphere of the labour movement, was also part of a wider push within the CPGB for greater engagement with the institutions of the state and alternative strategies to class based industrial militancy. The National Front, alongside the rise of the Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher, represented a 'decisive shift in the balance of hegemony' towards the right.[48] This required what reformers in the CPGB called the 'broad democratic alliance', which

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[44] *Morning Star*, 26 August, 1977.
[45] Dave Cook, *A Knife at the Throat of Us All: Racism, Fascism and the National Front* (London, 1978) p. 23.
[46] ANL, 'Anti-Nazi League Founding statement', CP/CENT/SUBS/04/15, LHASC.
[47] Gideon Ben-Tovim, ' The Struggle Against Racism: Theoretical and Strategic Perspectives', *Marxism Today* (July 1978) p. 212.
[48] Stuart Hall, 'The Great Moving Right Show', *Marxism Today* (January 1979) p. 14; p. 15.

sought a multi-faceted approach to the state and the problems of capitalist society, promoting extensive interactions with many diverse elements of British society, the democratic process and state institutions.

The counter-hegemony of the broad democratic alliance

By the mid-1970s, a significant section of the CPGB's membership were putting forward the argument that *The British Road to Socialism* needed to be more than an electoral and industrial alliance between the CPGB, the trade unions and the Labour left. This strategy had, so far, confined the CPGB to 'immediate defensive struggles against attacks by the Tory government, against unemployment, against wage restraint, against trade union legislation' and while these struggles, such as the Miners' Strike of 1973-74, had toppled the Conservative Government, it had, as Dave Cook admitted, not 'won millions of workers, or the Labour Party, to an alternative political perspective to the Tories or right wing Labour'.[49] The reformers argued that the Party needed to be more involved in the democratic process and the institutions of the state, which required a programme to exert influence, not just through the Labour left and the trade unions, but amongst many of the state's institutions and other areas of civil society. To affect change and provide an alternative to the present capitalist system, the Communists needed to embedded within all spheres of British society, to build a 'broad democratic alliance' as outlined in the 1977 edition of *The British Road to Socialism*.

Those who sought to reform the Party believed an emphasis on the trade unions and the Labour left had failed to recognise that there were other people within the working class, 'oppressed according to their sex, their colour, the social services they use, their age, as young people, where they live', that were politicised by their 'consciousness of oppression, rather than [by] their class exploitation',[50] and this required differing tactics to traditional labourist activism. Recognising the

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[49] Dave Cook, 'Mass Campaigns, the Left and the Communist Party', *Comment*, November 27, 1976, p. 377.
[50] Dave Cook, 'The British Road to Socialism and the Communist Party', *Marxism Today* (December 1978) p. 371

importance of these areas of oppression was not a rejection of class struggle entirely, but the reformers acknowledged that they demanded immediate actions to redress inequalities and discrimination within the capitalist system – that fighting these forms of oppression, like racism, were 'a democratic and an ideological issue',[51] as much as it was an issue of class.

The reformers in the CPGB drew upon the influence of Italian Marxist of the inter-war period, Antonio Gramsci. According to Gramsci, modern capitalist societies, like Britain, were analogous to a 'powerful system of fortresses and earthworks', where the state and civil society both performed the 'function of "hegemony" which the dominant group exercises throughout society and… "direct domination" or command'.[52] To combat the hegemony of the dominant group, a 'war of position' is required, where revolutionaries were to occupy strategic positions within the capitalist system and the institutions of the state to create a 'counter-hegemony' to the present order. As Gramsci wrote in *The Prison Notebooks*:

> The massive structures of the modern democracies, both as state organisations, and as complexes of associations in civil society, constitute the art of politics as it were the "trenches" and the permanent fortifications of the front in the war of position.[53]

This 'war of position' was central to the extension of forces under the 'broad democratic alliance' in the 1977 edition of *The British Road to Socialism*.

This Gramscian influence was often combined by the reformers with the ideas of 'Eurocommunism', which had started to take hold in other Western European Communist Parties, such as the Communist Party of Italy and the Communist Party of Spain (PCE). The General

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[51] Ben-Tovim 'The Struggle Against Racism', p. 205.
[52] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London, 1971) p. 238; p. 12.
[53] A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p. 243.

Secretary of the PCE, Santiago Carrillo, stated that Eurocommunists 'agreed on the need to advance to socialism with democracy, a multi-party system, parliaments and representative institutions… and the development of the broadest forms of popular participation at all levels and in all branches of social activity'.[54] Inside the CPGB, the term 'Eurocommunism' was not used with any uniformity, but indicated an acceptance that the Leninist notion of armed insurrection was 'inappropriate… for advanced capitalist societies'.[55] As CPGB reformer Geoff Roberts declared in a debate with Alex Callinicos over *The British Road to Socialism* in the SWP journal *International Socialism*, the revolutionary rhetoric of 'smashing the state' was 'not rooted in any concrete analysis of the present-day British state'.[56]

The 1977 edition of *The British Road to Socialism* demonstrated much of these Gramscian/Eurocommunist ideals, which signified the official, yet highly disputed, acceptance that the struggle for socialism needed 'not only… to be an association of class forces,… but of other important forces in society which emerge out of areas of oppression not always directly connected with the relations of production'.[57] 'Capitalism', the new programme stated, 'not only exploits people at work, but impinges on every aspect of their lives',[58] so groups and movements outside the traditional labour movement were of increasing importance, as it was evident that 'class oppression, and the struggle against it, extend[ed] far beyond the workplace'.[59] The Communist Party, 'as the organised Marxist political party', imbued itself with a 'special role to play in developing broad left unity', acting as pivotal organisations and mediating between the traditional union movement and other social forces for building of the 'broad democratic alliance'.[60]

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[54] Santiago Carrillo, *'Eurocommunism' and the state* (London, 1977) p. 110.

[55] Sam Aaronovitch, 'Eurocommunism: A Discussion of Carrillo's *Eurocommunism and the state*', *Marxism Today* (July 1978) p. 222.

[56] Geoff Roberts, 'The CP, the SWP and the Strategy for Socialism in Britain', *International Socialism* 1/99 (June 1977) p. 23.

[57] CPGB, *The British Road to Socialism* (London, 1977) p. 29.

[58] CPGB, *The British Road to Socialism* [1977], p. 29.

[59] CPGB, *The British Road to Socialism* [1977], p. 33.

[60] CPGB, *The British Road to Socialism* [1977], p. 34.

The limits of the state as an anti-racist agent

This idea of embedding revolutionary forces within the capitalist system and occupying positions within the institutions of the state, working in the long-term towards building a 'counter-hegemony' and in the short-term to tackle incidents of discrimination and inequality, had a significant effect upon the Communist Party's anti-racist strategy. The emphasis of the Party was on building momentum at the local community level to combat fascist activities and implementing progressive policies that would reduce the socio-economic base for racism, through co-operation with local levels of government.

As the National Front's electoral hopes diminished, there was a rise in fascist intimidation in areas with high immigrant populations, with racist violence and intimidation becoming an everyday issue for most black Britons. As a 1978 report by the Bethnal Green and Stepney Trades Council on racial attacks, *Blood on the Streets*, noted:

> The barrage of harassment, insult and intimidation, week in week out, fundamentally determines how the immigrant community here lives and works… The experience of life in East London has led many Bengalee [sic] families to accept racial abuse and attack as a constant factor of everyday existence in Britain.[61]

For the CPGB, this was one of the most immediate concerns within the anti-racist struggle and despite legislation already existing against incitement to racial hatred, the Party demanded that the Race Relations Act be used effectively by the authorities and 'prosecute those like the National Front who spread racial insults and race hatred'.[62] This reflected the belief amongst the black communities in Britain that the state was proficient in using legislation against them, such as the

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[61] Bethnal Green and Stepney Trades Council, *Blood on the Streets: A Report by Bethnal Green and Stepney Trades Council on Racial Attacks in East London* (London, 1978) 3-4
[62] Untitled CPGB flyer for 1977 GLC Elections, CP/LON/RACE/02/06, LHASC.

Immigration Act and the 'stop and search' (or 'sus') laws, but reluctant to use legislation to protect them from racist attacks. As the Bethnal Green and Stepney Trades Council wrote, 'there is considerable doubt within the immigrant community as to the interest and impartiality of the police handling complaints of racist attacks'.[63] While the CPGB supported the ANL and still called for state institutions, such as the Home Office, the police and the Commission for Racial Equality, to act decisively against racial discrimination and incitement, confidence in the state to make positive contributions towards combating racism was diminishing.

By 1979, confidence had been severely damaged, particularly after the death of Blair Peach, the anti-fascist protestor believed to be killed by the police during a demonstration against the National Front in Southall in the days before the 1979 General Election, alongside 342 arrests and numerous injuries at the hands of police.[64] Home Secretary Merlyn Rees was accused by the Communist Party of allowing the NF 'to spread its racist poison in clear violation of the Race Relations Act' and Metropolitan Police Commissioner David McNee was also accused of 'protecting a handful of racist hoodlums', when it was McNee's 'duty to protect the freedom of the citizens of Southall', but he had failed to do so.[65] Therefore the death of Blair Peach and the violent clashes in Southall were 'the direct result of the toleration of the National Front provocations by the authorities', declared CPGB General Secretary Gordon McLennan.[66]

Thatcherism and institutional racism

The violence of the police against anti-racist protestors and the black communities was seen as part of a wider shift to the right that was highlighted by the electoral victory of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Government in the General Election in May 1979. Martin Jacques, a

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[63] BG & STC, *Blood on the Streets*, p. 9.
[64] CARF/Southall Rights, *Southall The Birth of a Black Community* (London, 1982) p. 60; Dilip Hiro, *Black British, White British: A History of Race Relations in Britain* (London, 1992) p. 173.
[65] *Morning Star*, 25 April, 1979.
[66] *Morning Star*, 25 April, 1979.

leading reformer in the CPGB and editor of the Party journal *Marxism Today*, wrote that Thatcherism asserted a 'popular *and* authoritarian rightism' that combined traditional laissez-faire economics with the theme of 'law and order', promoting 'an essentially regressive and conservative solution embracing such themes as authority, law and order, patriotism, national unity, the family and individual freedom'.[67] The Party reformers that grouped around *Marxism Today* saw Thatcherism more than simply 'the corresponding political bedfellow of a period of capitalist recession',[68] but the result of a longer ideological shift to the right, which required a long-sighted ideological campaign – a 'war of position' – rather than just the traditional leftist strategy of industrial opposition. As demonstrated by the police tactics used in policing demonstrations, Britain's black communities and industrial relations in the 1970s, it was difficult to adequately confront the power of the repressive institutions of the state, so the reformers in the CPGB argued that the 'broad democratic alliance' was better mobilised through peaceful activism in local communities and through local governments, which was reflected in the Party's anti-racist campaigns.

With the Conservative Government ruling at parliamentary level, the CPGB increasingly saw that their part in the anti-racist movement was to be most effective at grassroots level, co-operating with local councils, the local Community Relations Commissions (CRCs) and other community and minority organisations. As the local CRCs, and many other broad-based anti-racist organisations, welcomed individual members, the Communist Party encouraged its members to join, affiliate their branches to the organisations and be involved in the elections for the general council and the executive committee, although it warned against explicitly converting these organisations to the politics of the CPGB.[69] As the Thatcherite Government gathered strength, this reinforced the belief by the Party reformers that the strategies required to

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[67] Martin Jacques, 'Thatcherism – The Impasse Broken? ', *Marxism Today* (October 1979) p. 10.
[68] Hall, 'The Great Moving Right Show', p. 14.
[69] National Race Relations Committee, *Racism: How to Combat It* (London, 1978) p. 5.

sufficiently tackle Thatcherism lay more in a long-term 'war of position', than any confrontational strategy.

However this view was not shared by others within the left, in the anti-racist movement and in the black communities. The inner-city riots of 1981, waged primarily between black and white youth against the police, demonstrated a deep rupture between the state and Britain's black communities. The riots that occurred in Brixton in April 1981 and then swept across the country in July 1981 can be seen as a reaction to the racism of the police directed primarily at black youth, as well as a lack of redress through political channels by black Britons. The narrative of the increasingly hostile relationship between the police and Britain's black communities is well documented[70] and the 1981 riots can be seen as a culmination of decades of racial harassment and mistrust on both sides. The riots were also symptomatic of a wider disillusionment, shared by both black and white youth, with the Conservative Government's monetarist economic policies, which contributed to high unemployment and a lack of investment in inner-city infrastructure. For many radical leftist, anti-racist and black activists, the police actions during these riots demonstrated that the institutions of the state were violent and racist and co-operation with the state in any form was betrayed by its focus upon repressive measures. As Martin Barker and Anne Beezer wrote in the journal *International Socialism* in 1981:

> [T]he failure of many socialists even to recognise the racism and renewed ideology of the state… must bring into question the nature of that socialism. For Marxists, a renewed attack on reformist attitudes is not only a theoretical nicety, *but an impelling political necessity*…. The line between reformism and reaction

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[70] See: Stuart Hall, et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the state and Law and Order* (London, 1978); Simon Holdaway, *The Racialisation of British Policing*, (Houndmills, 1996); Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London, 2002) pp. 84-145.

should be recognised for what it now is – a matter of
rhetoric only.[71] (My emphasis)

While agreeing that under Thatcherism the coercive institutions of
the state had increased their explicit 'law and order' agenda, the
Communist Party reformers did not believe in abstention from all
interaction with the state and campaigning for reforms within the present
system, with a particular focus upon work at the grassroots community
level. Gideon Ben-Tovim, a member of the CPGB's National Race
Relations Committee, wrote in *Politics and Power*, along with other
variously aligned leftists, that 'inaccessibility of such areas of state
administration', such as 'the courts and the judiciary, the police and the
Civil Service', left progressive political action to be performed at local
government level, especially in fighting racism.[72] Instead of rejecting aid
programmes and projects offered by local government as 'forms of
bribery', which was proclaimed by many radicals, Ben-Tovim and his
co-authors suggested that these could be used as 'weapons… for the
benefit of black interests, in terms of access to resources, a heightened
political awareness and cohesion' and also part of a wider 'means of
democratising the state apparatuses by opening them up by black
participation and control'.[73] This was where the 'broad democratic
alliance' could perform best, believed many of the Party's reformers, in a
long-term ideological 'war of position' aiming to open up participation in
politics for a wider range of the British population, inclusive of minority
positions and perspectives.

The epilogue of new times

Despite these developments in the Communist Party's political strategy
towards widening the 'broad democratic alliance' and working further
within the democratic, yet capitalist, state system, it was an inescapable
fact that the Party was in a state of decline. In 1979, the Party had 20,599

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[71] Martin Barker & Anne Beezer, 'The Language of Racism – An Examination of Lord
Scarman's Report on the Brixton Riots', *International Socialism*, 2/18 (1983) p. 125.
[72] Gideon Ben-Tovim, John Gabriel, Ian Law & Kathleen Stredder, 'Race, Left Strategies and
the state', *Politics and Power*, 3 (1981) p. 173.
[73] Ben-Tovim, et. al., 'Race, Left Strategies and the state', p. 176.

members, further declining to 18,458 in 1981, having lost over 10,000 in ten years.[74] The Party had had no MPs since 1950 and only five candidates had been elected in local elections.[75] The push for reform in the Party had also resulted in the Party being torn apart by internal strife. As Thatcherism continued into the 1980s, the Communist Party becoming increasingly divided between the reformers and the traditional industrialist wing. By the time that the Miners' Strike had ended in 1985, CPGB membership fallen to 12,711, which then fell to a mere 7,615 in 1989 at the time of the collapse of the Soviet bloc.[76] Whatever the initial potential the Communist Party of Great Britain had within the anti-racist movement, this had evaporated by the early 1980s.

At the same time, Britain's black communities were on diverging paths of how to negotiate the political landscape under Thatcherism. There was a serious push for greater representation in the major political parties, although not just as rank-and-file members, but as electoral candidates, seen in the election of four black Labour MPs in the 1987 General Election, and through separate 'black sections' in the Labour Party.[77] As Conservatives dominated national politics in the 1980s, Labour-run councils took up anti-racist campaigns at the local level, providing funding for politically acceptable anti-racist initiatives and organisations, anti-racist advertisements and education sessions in the local civil service sectors, described by Paul Gilroy as 'municipal anti-racism'.[78] Religion also became an increasingly appealing conduit for political agency, particularly Islam and Rastafarianism amongst different sections of British black youth.[79] Few black people joined left-wing organisations, as in the past, their concerns had been subsumed within the

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[74] Willie Thompson, *The Good Old Cause: British Communism 1920 - 1991* (London, 1992) p. 218

[75] Richard Cross, 'The CPGB and the "Collapse of Socialism", 1977-1991', unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Manchester (2003) p. 314.

[76] 'Communist Party Membership', CP/CENT/ORG/19/04, LHASC.

[77] See: Kalbir Shukra, *The Changing Pattern of Black Politics in Britain* (London, 1998).

[78] Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, p. 177; See pages 177-199 for an in-depth discussion of 'municipal anti-racism'.

[79] See: Hiro, *Black British, White British*, pp. 67-80; pp. 182-193.

left's primary focus upon class politics and industrial militancy.[80] Like other sections of British society, particularly young Britons, many black youth remained apolitical and as Kenneth Roberts wrote, 'Rather than being channelled into party politics, their discontents [were] more likely to be expressed on the streets'.[81]

The role of the Communist Party of Great Britain in extra-parliamentary and anti-racist politics in post-war Britain is a significant one, distinguished by the place it occupied within the British labour movement and its political strategies. Throughout the post-war era, the CPGB was the largest political organisation to the left of the Labour Party, with a considerable influence in the trade unions and a distinct leftist programme of working within the contemporary capitalist system to achieve a socialist Britain through parliamentary democracy. This strategy had a large effect upon the Party's anti-racist strategy as the Party played an important role in bridging the gap between radical anti-racists who did not want engage on any level with the state and the wider labour movement, as well as other broad-based progressive organisations, who had a much more reformist and moderate agenda. From the late 1940s until the 1980s, the Communist Party continually campaigned for laws against racial discrimination to be introduced and then strengthened, as well as calling for the institutions of the state to use the laws in place *effectively* to combat racism. This saw the Party rely on state institutions, primarily the police, the judiciary and the Home Office, to play a positive role in race relations by tackling racism through legislation. However this reliance upon the state was hindered by the fact that these institutions were often accused of being complicit in acts of racial discrimination and forms of institutional racism. The limits of this

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[80] See: Evan Smith, '"Class Before Race": British Communism and the Place of Empire in Post-War Race Relations', *Science & Society*, 72/4 (October 2008) pp. 455-481; Satnam Virdee, 'Racism and Resistance in British Trade Unions, 1948-79', in Peter Alexander & Rick Halpern (eds), *Racializing Class, Classifying Race: Labour and Difference in Britain, the USA and Africa* (London, 2000) pp. 122-149; Trevor Carter, *Shattering Illusions: West Indians in British Politics* (London, 1987); A. Sivanandan, *A Different Hunger: Writings on Black Resistance* (London, 1982).

[81] Kenneth Roberts, 'Youth Unemployment and Urban Unrest', in John Benyon, *Scarman and After: Essays Reflecting on Lord Scarman's Report, the Riots and their Aftermath* (Oxford, 1984) p. 182.

strategy saw reformers and anti-racist activists inside the Party promote greater engagement with the institutions of the state at local community level and occupying strategic positions within the state to influence immediate reforms, rather than solely relying on state institutions to act decisively. However, by the 1980s, major structural and political problems affecting the Communist Party hindered its ability to play an effective role in the anti-racist movement. The Communist Party of Great Britain entered a period of steep decline in the 1980s, collapsing entirely in late 1991, but its role as a mediator between moderate and radical elements of the British left and anti-racist movement demonstrates an important part of the history in the political development of a post-colonial Britain.