

# 1977: The Battle of Lewisham



An account of the street battles which took place in London when local residents decided to stop a fascist National Front march in their community.

On August 13 1977, the fascist National Front (NF) tried to march through the multi-racial working class area of Lewisham in South East London. It was a national mobilisation with local NF branches coming from all over Britain. However, a large anti-racist mobilisation turned out to oppose them in what was to become the biggest street battle against the fascists since Cable Street in 1936. The NF had grown rapidly during the 1970s, evolving from a tiny group of fascist crackpots to a large party with a national presence. They even threatened to overtake the Liberals as the third place party in British politics. In May 1977, the NF had gained 119,000 votes in the elections for the Greater London Council, in some areas gaining one in five of all votes.

These electoral successes were accompanied by growing racial violence, with attacks becoming more frequent. The NF also began to feel in control of the streets and began attacking the meetings, paper sales and other events of political opponents. Just one week before the march in Lewisham, there was an (unsuccessful) attempt to burn down the offices of the Trotskyist group, Militant.

When word got out that the NF were planning to march, the All-Lewisham Campaign Against Racism and Fascism (ALCARAF) – a group made up of various Labour Party members, local religious and ‘community’ leaders – refused to directly oppose them. They organised a counter-demonstration miles away from the NF assembly point and hours before the NF were due to arrive in Lewisham. However, thousands of people decided to ignore the advice of the march organisers and headed over to where the NF were due to meet.

The fascists couldn't meet at their original location and in the end the police smuggled small groups of fascists through the gloomy back streets of South East London. There were over 4,000 police on the streets of Lewisham that day protecting the NF. This was also the first time that riot police had been deployed on mainland Britain. However, this was obviously not enough for the NF who later complained that they hadn't been given enough protection!

Over 10,000 people turned out to oppose the NF. Even before the NF found themselves on the wrong end of a hail of bricks, bottles and smoke bombs, the NF were visibly frightened by the massive numbers of anti-racists. Black, white and Asian youth all came to fight the fascists.

As the march moved slowly through the streets, the fascists were getting hit from all sides. At one point the march was cut in half as anti-racists smashed through police lines and engaged in hand-to-hand fighting with the NF. The fascists were completely overpowered by the superior numbers of the counter-demonstrators.

The police had tried to defend the fascists and had failed. They tested new 'crowd control' methods and indiscriminately attacked the crowds of anti-racist demonstrators. However, the counter-demonstrators refused to run and fought back. With a taste of their collective strength they smashed through the police and attacked the fascists with rage. Because of the large numbers of locals on the day, people used their knowledge of the back streets to out-smart both the police and fascists with surprise attacks. In the end, the NF march was dispersed without even completing half their march route!

Of course the media and politicians' response did not represent the joy that filled the streets of Lewisham that day. The press portrayed the fighting in Lewisham as a battle between two sets of extremists. The then deputy leader of the Labour Party, Michael Foot declared "You don't stop the Nazis by throwing bottles or bashing the police. The most ineffective way of fighting the fascists is to behave like them." All in all, the mainstream political establishment refused to back the defence of a community against fascists.

The battles that took place in Lewisham on August 13 1977 helped restart a new spirit of militant anti-fascism within the working class of Britain. Soon after Lewisham, the Anti-Nazi League was founded and though it strayed into a wet, liberal reformism it never recovered from (due in no small part to it being a Socialist Workers' Party front group), it undoubtedly started out as a broad-based militant anti-fascist group. Lewisham also helped ease racial tensions as black, white and Asian youth fought side by side to kick the fascists out of their community and local fascists no longer felt so cocky about publicising their views and actions. As socialist writer Dave Widgery wrote:

*"The black community...had a glimpse of a white anti-racist feeling which was much bigger and more militant than the liberal community-relations tea parties might suggest. Every little racist was made smaller. Many people who had reservations about direct action found themselves regretting they had not been there too."*

The Battle of Lewisham showed the fascists that their presence would not be tolerated in our communities. More importantly, it showed us that none of these fascist muppets were the invincible street fighters they were stereotyped as. They were an identified menace in our communities and not only should they be forcibly removed, but Lewisham showed that when we act together, they could be forcibly removed.

¡No Pasaran!

*libcom group*