

# UCPI: Spy Cops in the Anti-Fascist Movement

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On 12 May  
former



undercover officer 'Paul Gray' is due to give evidence to the Undercover Policing Inquiry (UCPI). Our latest blog from the inquiry tells the story of the Anti-Nazi League, which galvanised opposition to fascism in the late 1970s – only to be targeted by police spies.

In the mid to late 1970s the fascist National Front (NF) was a significant force in the UK. With tens of thousands of members, the NF was a serious threat to migrant communities, people of colour, trade unionists and socialists.

Although it stood in elections and occasionally obtained a sizeable vote, the NF was a street force

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rather than a major electoral presence. Its members terrorised minority groups and attacked socialist and trade-union meetings.

A major role in mobilising mass opposition to the NF was played by the Anti-Nazi League (ANL), a broad-based anti-fascist movement formed in late 1977.

### **Building the movement against fascism**

The ANL was founded in the wake of the Battle of Lewisham in August 1977, in which anti-fascists disrupted plans by an insurgent NF to march through Clifton Rise, southeast London, which had a large black population. The counter-demonstration united trade unionists with the black community—and marked the beginning of a generalised campaign against the NF.

The ANL grew rapidly to become the NF's most significant opponent. In its first year it recruited between 40,000 and 50,000 members, distributed over five million leaflets and sold around one million anti-NF badges and stickers. Such was the level of its popular support that the ANL was widely regarded as the largest extra-parliamentary movement since the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND).

As the ANL grew, trade unions began to develop anti-fascist workplace groups—Civil Servants Against the Nazis, Teachers Against the Nazis, and the like. On one occasion, thanks to the support of the National Union of Mineworker, some 60,000 Yorkshire miners went to work wearing ANL stickers on their helmets.

In April 1978, the ANL and Rock Against Racism organised a huge carnival in Victoria Park, east London. The festival, which attracted approximately 80,000 people, mixed political messages with music.

Mass events like these grabbed the imagination of many young people and increased their confidence to

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confront racist and fascist ideas. One result was School Kids against the Nazis (SKAN), a pupil-organised anti-fascist movement.



### Resisting the NF as a street force

Many 'official' leaders of the labour and trade union movement preferred not to confront the NF. The work of the ANL was vital in challenging this passivity, and in galvanising people who saw the need to oppose fascists but had previously been uncertain about physically confronting them.

The late 1970s saw major flashpoints as the NF responded to its flagging electoral fortunes by taking to the streets to intimidate and attack black and Asian communities. The ANL came out in Leicester, where the NF had previously done well in local elections, to resist plans for a fascist march. Meanwhile, in Southall, the local council permitted the NF to use the town hall for a public meeting in the run-up to the 1979 general election. Thousands of anti-fascists poured into Southall to help the local community demonstrate its opposition to the NF.

On the day of the meeting, the police's Special Patrol Group ran riot, injuring many people and killing teacher and ANL member Blair Peach.

### Undercover police in the anti-fascist movement

During the late 1970s undercover officers from the Special Demonstration Squad infiltrated and monitored the ANL and SKAN.

PILC represents former leading members of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), who were central to the development of the ANL. In our [submission](#) to the UCPI we sum up the work of spy cops in the anti-fascist movement as follows:

*“The closest [Paul] Gray’ ever comes to reporting on violence is his note that a school-boy had a fight with his brother.*

*These children were either the children of Socialist Workers Party members or children who were engaged enough with their society to be part of the School Kids Against the Nazis [...]*

*In the course of ‘Paul Gray’s’ deployment, Column 88 [another fascist group] were threatening to burn down the homes of SWP members. The National Front were attacking Bengalis in Brick Lane, smashing up reggae record shops and graffitiiing mosques. They were burning down Indian restaurants and murdering young men like Altab Ali and Ishaque Ali in Whitechapel and Hackney. Whilst they were doing that, Gray and his [...] “exemplary” SDS colleagues were writing about what they refer to as [the] “jewish” finance of the Anti-Nazi League, a “negress” activist, an activist with a “large jewish nose”, and “coloured hooligans” [...]*

*Instead of investigating the racist firebombing that killed 13 young black people in New Cross, the Special Demonstration Squad were reporting on school children and providing MI5 with copies of Socialist Workers Party baby-sitting rotas.”*

The above account illustrates something of the nature of undercover political policing in the late 1970s. As our clients testify, spy cops pored over the minutiae of the political activities of SKAN, ANL and the SWP— but were rather less interested in the racism and violence of the National Front.

The inquiry continues.

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