

SHEFFIELD DEFENCE CAMPAIGN SPECIAL EDITION

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S D C Background

Since its inception, over 5 years ago (following the N.F. march in Hillsborough) - the Sheffield Defence Campaign (S.D.C.) has endeavoured to fight against injustice in general, and racism and fascism in particular. The S.D.C. is a grass-roots based organisation of black and white individual people who are committed to actively opposing racism both in its individual and institutional forms. In particular, the S.D.C. has vigorously opposed immigration laws, police brutality against black people and all racist attacks. For instance, from Oct. to Dec. 1987, the S.D.C. took on Local Council bureaucracy and forced them to set up a £15,000 hardship fund for black and Irish people, who could not afford the £60 registration fees demanded by the racist British Home Office. The S.D.C. has also been instrumental in fighting (and winning) other campaigns:

- * The police framing up black people: as in the case of Zafar Iqbal, Mohammed Iqbal and the 'Page Hall 3'.
- * Racist immigration laws: that put Feroze Khan and Ranjit Chakravorty under threat of deportation.
- * The arrest of 5 people: (the Sheffield 5 Defence Campaign) on a demonstration against the racist x-headmaster, Ray Honeyford.
- * The Sheffield Council's institutionalised racism: - in its housing policies, as has been clearly shown by the Akram family's case.
- * The S.D.C. (amongst others between Nov.-March 87/88), has directly opposed and stopped the distribution of race-hate fascist propaganda, at the markets in Sheffield.

These are some of the examples of the way the S.D.C. has been the MAIN and PROGRESSIVE Sheffield organisation to systematically and consistently challenge racism, wherever it has appeared.

Progressive in the definition: of those people who are constantly seeking to extend and enhance the rights of oppressed peoples. Such as, women, racial minorities, religious minorities, gays, lesbians, the poor and powerless etc. As opposed to reactionary or right-wing people who in general support and want to continue the existing racist, sexist and homophobic status-quo.



It is with this background, that the S.D.C. puts forward this analysis of the Rushdie affair. With a view to countering the misinformed racist and chauvanistic diatribe of the mass media. Secondly, to put forward an analysis that DOES take account of black peoples experiences in Britain. Thus locating the Rushdie affair within the wider and progressive black political debate in contemporary Britain.

MUSLIMS IN BRITAIN

[What has been ignored by almost everyone taking part in the Rushdie debate is the position of Britain's Muslim communities as a section of the black working class.

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"SATANIC VERSES"

Whose families came to Bradford, Leicester or manchester to do badly paid jobs, in the mills, foundaries and factories; that the indigenous workers were no longer prepared to tolerate. They now face some of the highest unemployment rates in the country. Also conveniently forgotten, is the history of political action of these communities. For example, strikes demanding decent pay and conditions; campaigns against racist immigration laws; and organising self-defence against racist attacks. Though Bradfod today has become notorious as the scene of the burning of "Satanic Verses"; it is also however, the city which 8 years ago saw the victory, that established the principle of the RIGHT TO SELF-DEFENCE - against racist attacks. The same community fought and freed the "Bradford 12", who faced possible life imprisonment for protecting their community against fascist violence. During the campaigns to free the "Bradford 12", the "Newhame 8" and "Newham 7", the black community as a whole came out in support of these struggles as black people; not specifically, as Muslims - as with the Rushdie business.

But the overlap between political and religious identities under a racist state is not easily defined. As such, religious leaders and self-appointed (or more often Council-appointed) community leaders are able to hi-jack and manipulate genuine concerns of black people - for their own religious or political ends.

Ultimately, this reflects the failure of the wider black political movements to consolidate themselves and provide a real and progressive alterantive. A failure which is increasingly linked to the interventions of the Labour Party in black politics, in an attempt to defuse its radical potential.

Meanwhile, Douglas Hurd and Kenneth Baker's remarks concerning the book burning are typical of successive Tory and Labour governments alike. They convey the familiar message - that black people must assimilate into the "British way of life"- for their own good, and for the good of "race-relations".] The establishment and much of the media's pronouncements on the Rushdie issue are located within this atmosphere and its rationale is co-vert racism.

As for overt racism:

The first N.F. stickers, taking advantage of the racist hysteria - around the Rushdie issue - drummed up by the media have appeared in Sheffield. It reads:

SALMAN RUSHDIE - born in Bombay - causing trouble in Britain - REPATRIATION NOW!

This is the backdrop to the Rushdie affair and must be borne firmly in mind, in regard to the media. It is however, not the whole story. Let us start with the facts.

THE FACTS:

Salman Rushdie's book, the "Satanic Verses" was published in Oct. 1988. Prior to publication, copies of the book had been sent to the 'Society for the Promotion of Religious Tolerance', housed in Regent's Park Mosque in London. (The Muslim theological centre of the U.K.). Copies were also sent to Saudi Arabia (the world Islamic theological centre), and also to Pakistan. Initially, there was no reaction from any of these religious institutions (probably due to the influence of the West's economic relationships between the pro-Western fundamentalist states), such as Saudi Arabia.

The first of the public demonstrations against Satanic Verses and Rushdie emanated in Bradford, in late Jan/ early Feb 1989. Copies of Satanic Verses were publicly burned and rushdie's life threatened. An official of the Bradford Council of Mosques declared: "If he comes here, I tell you he will be dead".

Bradford was followed by similar demonstrations in other major British cities, with concentrations of Muslim populations. Only after these events were there similar marches in Iran and Pakistan. It was some 4 months after the publication of the book (and following these public confirmations of Islamic leaders' abilities to mobilize large numbers of Muslims); that the Ayatollah Khomeini issued his death threat against Rushdie, offering \$3 million dollars reward to anyone who murdered him.

What are the issues and more importantly, what is behind them?

Muslim religious leaders claim the book is blasphemous and want it banned. They claim it has lampooned their prophet Mohammed; it has treated with irreverence the contents of the Quran and has criticised aspects of their religion in the most contemptuous manner.

Satanic Verses is not one of Rushdie's better works. It is confused, complicated and unclear. It thus permits virtually any interpretation of it - that any reader cares to make. There does seem to be little distinction between (religious) fact and fiction. Additionally, Rushdie has certainly exercised artistic licence, in concretising certain parables. (Eg. Satanic Verses, which do exist in the Quran). He has caricatured Mohammed and pictured him as being

tempted by the Satanic Verses. However, he shows him to overcome these temptations and remain true to his faith.

Though what is less known about the book is that it is also very anti-imperialist. It describes Britain as akin to nazi Germany and the author is extremely derogatory towards Thatcher. Furthermore, he has used foul language throughout this book.

MONOLITHIC ?

Undoubtedly, the book has caused deep offence to millions of Muslims around the world. Certainly, their religious leaders have claimed as such. Whether Rushdie should be allowed to publish such a book, has to be a clear and emphatic YES! There should be no subject beyond the bounds of criticism - whether artistically or not.

All religions have from time to time been criticised, even ridiculed and Islam is not an exception to this. [Today Islam is being presented as a homogenous and monolithic orthodoxy. It has however, had a long history of dissent and criticism. Even in Britain, where WOMEN have taken the lead; in criticising Islamic fundamentalism, both in the context of the Rushdie issue and in other areas too - but without giving up their right to call themselves Muslims.]

Indeed, the recent (27-5-89) and the largest demonstration so far-in London, was opposed by a contingent of women: "Muslim Women Against Fundamentalist Islam".

Also, within Iran itself, there have been massive protests by different Islamic sects. Clearly Islam is not a monolithic orthodoxy and does inspire dissent and criticism.

Whilst Islam (like all other religions have had to), will learn to accommodate and deal with criticism; it is however, totally hypocritical for the West to espouse to hold the higher moral ground on this issue.

FUNDAMENTALIST ISLAM.

The West has portrayed Islamic fundamentalists in Iran as barbaric and opposed to basic human rights. The hypocrisy of this is exposed, when at the same time, for example Geoffrey Howe upholds the cause of the Afghan fundamentalists - who are depicted as "democratic heroes". (The C.I.A.'s largest cash and armaments is to these Afghan rebels). The West has also fully supported pro-Western fundamentalist states such as Saudi Arabia, which is pouring money into the promotion of Islamic fundamentalism in other countries, including Pakistan and India. This type of cont-

inuing imperialist (Western) rationale has also to be borne in mind, especially in regard to government statements on this affair.

MUSLIM ANGER:

However, as far as the British people are concerned, Britain today is a society where religion plays little or no part in their lives. Apart from the occassional protests about insults against Christianity like the 'Life of Brian' and the 'Last Temptation of Christ', blasphemy is not a major issue. In Islam however, religious considerations dominate the lives of every Muslim. What you wear, what you eat, how you organise your day, are all prescribed and pre-ordained. The Muslims view of the world is primarily a religious one; and irrespective of the level to which each individual Muslim practices his or her faith, all share the hurt caused by (what they have been told) about the Satanic Verses. Muslim reaction has been charecterised not only by anger and a deeply felt feeling of public insult, but also by an inner feeling of hurt wounding and isolation. They hold a genuine sense of resentment. Rightly or wrongly is not the issue here. The issue, they feel, is that no one outside the Muslim community has tried to understand the Muslim cause.

In this atmosphere of mistrust, some Muslim critics of Satanic Verses have even suggested that Rushdie is "championing Western secular opposition to Islam". This is not true. First of all, Rushdie is himself a Muslim. Secondly, to accuse him of "colluding with racism"- as some have, is totally inaccurate. Rushdie has been actively (as well as academically) fighting racism for at least 15 years. He has bee actively involved in campaigning against deportations and is generally acknowledged as a fervent anti-imperialist. What is true however, is that the Western establishment and media are using him as a pawn in their ideological battle to denigrate black peoples cultures in general, and Islam in particular.

POWER POLITICS.

The Muslim leaders inturn, are also engaged in power politics. Indeed both camps are using Rushdie as the instrument for their political manouverings. It is for these pertinent reasons that we need to look deeper into the public opposition to Rushdie to see some of the other reasons for the Muslim mobilisations against the Satanic Verses.

Khomeini's death sentence on Rushdie, coming as it did 4 months after publication should as such be analysed in relation to the Iranian political and economic situation in order to reveal the true picture. Because his pronouncements on Rushdie instantly diverted attention away from (at home and abroad) an economy shattered by 8 years of war. The ignominious defeat by Iraq (though not even Iraq denies that it started the war); and the thousands of political and religious opponents imprisoned, tortured and executed in the past 9 years. Khomeini's virulent attacks on Rushdie had little to do with religion but a great deal to do with the power struggle, between the various factions in the Iranian government. He seized on Satanic Verses as the instrument to maintain his (fast slipping) grip on the Iranian polity.

Following Khomeini's death sentence, the book has now been banned in all Muslim countries. The death threat against Rushdie however, has officially only been repeated by Libya. Some of the most violent demonstrations against Rushdie have taken place in Pakistan. Which interestingly itself, has just emerged from an 11 year dictatorship of General Zia. Like Iran, until recently, the power of Mullahs (Muslim equivalent of Bishops) under Zia's dictatorship was absolute in religious affairs and very considerable within the state apparatus too! Therefore, in Iran and Pakistan, the Mullahs inspired and orchestrated attacks on the Satanic Verses are much more to do with political power struggles than with religion.

THATCHER PROTECTOR OF FREEDOM ?

In Britain, following Khomeini's death threats, Thatcher and company were moved to defend Rushdie's right to publish (but were forced to take a much tougher stance by the other E.E.C. countries). Britain only cut off diplomatic links with Iran, following just such initiatives by other E.E.C. countries. NOT BECAUSE she wanted to! Britain did so very reluctantly, because she was eagerly arranging resumption of British exports to Iran. Though it was able to portray its reluctance, as defending the interests of British hostages in Iran. Thus, Thatcher found herself (more by accident than design) championing the cause of free speech. Thatcher however, is the LAST PERSON ON THIS PLANET to be able to espouse the virtues of protecting the freedoms of individuals; as she has spent the last ten years doing the exact opposite. The examples are legion:

*1980 The Home Office prosecutes N.C.C.L. legal officer Harriet Harman for allowing a journalist to check documents that had already been read out in open court.

*1984 Trade Unions are banned at G.C.H.Q. Those who refuse to resign their membership are later sacked.

*1985 The 20:20 Vision T.V. programme reveals surveillance of legitimate trade union activity. The programme is banned.

*1987 Spycatcher is banned. The government starts a lengthy saga spending millions of British peoples money to stop them reading about their own security services.

*1988 Immigration Act removes the last remaining rights under British law for Commonwealth men to be joined by their families in this country. It also restricts the right of appeal against deportations.

1,338 people were deported last year according to the Home Office Minister, Timothy Renton. This is a 50% increase on the number for 1987, and amounts to more than three a day!

*1988 The Home Secretary bans radio and T.V. interviews with Sinn Fein, the U.D.A. and paramilitaries. Sinn Fein has 56 Councillors and one M.P.

*1989 Viraj Mendis, a Sri Lankan under threat of persecution in his own country is forceably taken from his sanctuary in Manchester, by 100 police officers.

'FREEDOM OF SPEECH'

Unfortunately, some of the left have also jumped on this 'freedom of speech' bandwagon, to defend Rushdie, when clearly freedom of speech as espoused by Thatcher (and generally agreed by all politicians alike) does not exist. What passes for freedom of speech with the establishment in general is a highly selective, and distorted version of the concept.

To defend Rushdie on such definitions of freedom of speech is an unprincipled and hypocritical stand, because it ASSUMES FREEDOM OF SPEECH EXISTS, when clearly it does not!

Anyway would progressives want to defend the 'free speech' of fascists to peddle their 'Holocaust News' for instance, which claims the holocaust never took place? Additionally, would they want to defend the 'freedom' of capitalists to objectify and abuse women by saying pornography is 'free speech'? Thus, freedom of speech - regardless of the consequences to its victims - is not a very principled stand either. It is certainly not progressive.

Real free speech, the pre-condition of which is an OPEN AGENDA, does not and can not exist within the SELF-INTEREST parameters of capitalism. Real free speech is progressive. It is based on ideas that stem from a mutual respect and tolerance of racial, sexual and religious differences between different peoples. It is above all, diametrically opposed to ideologies that seek to sow racial, sexual and religious divisions amongst different peoples.

No. The defence of Rushdie's book lies in the same criteria that all progressive people all around the world have always used. This is the right to criticize, to fictionalise (as did George Orwell in "1984" to make his point and Robert Tressel did in the "Ragged Trousered Philanthropists"); to deviate, to discuss openly and without fear of intimidation; and finally to exercise our own intellects - in order to develop our own interpretations.

No subject, whether it is religion, political ideologies or sexual orientation or any other subject (taboo or not) should be beyond criticism and open discussion.

This is the universal tool of all progressive peoples in the world and always has been.

Muslim schools & the far-right.

Like Iran and Pakistan, there are other aspects behind the Bradford Muslim leaders' mobilising of their community against Satanic Verses. These aspects have much more to do with the Zakaria Muslim Girls School, than with religion; and they have not been too concerned as to who they form alliances with in order to get this school.

They have invited 'Parental Alliance for Choice in Education' (PACE), to represent them in their battle against Kirklees Council to win state-aid for the Zakaria Girls School. PACE fought and won the case for the 26 white racist parents who withdrew their children from a school, because 85% of its pupils were Asian. PACE is a direct offshoot of "Freedom Association", who intervened on the side of the bosses and against the Asian women strikers of Grunwick.

PACE was set up by Norris McWirter (chair of Freedom Association) and the neo-fascist Baroness Cox. Norris McWirter defended 'free speech' at the Wolverhampton Poly.. last year, when a South African Embassy Official was forced to abandon his visit. The Association's 15 point charter champions the right to: engage in private enterprise; the right to private ownership; and the freedom to belong or not to belong to a trade union, as prominent amongst others.

Ross McWirter, engaged in such activities alongside his twin brother, was assassinated by the "Balcombe Street Gang", who later said; they'd killed him, not because of his demand of identity cards for all Irish people living in Britain but because he was a "right-wing bastard".

The Kirklees Black Workers Group have called the Muslim parents association with PACE "hypocritical", and deferred their decision as to whether to continue supporting them.

If the Zakaria School succeeds in receiving Voluntary Aided Status (as its seeking), it would be funded 85% by the state BUT REMAIN UNDER THE CONTROL OF THE MOSQUES.

Such schools are discriminatory to women, as they have a narrow curriculum; that concentrates on religious studies, cooking, knitting etc; in other words, keeping women in their place. Such retrogressive ideas are wholly abhorrent to all progressive people and MUST BE TOTALLY OPPOSED. Education should be about (though it often is not), equality of opportunity not DENIAL OF OPPORTUNITIES.

This is not to suggest that state schools in general DO provide a satisfactory and non-sexist education to their female pupils. Indeed they systematically fall far short of this minimum requirement. The point however, is that 2 WRONGS DO NOT MAKE A RIGHT.

This means fighting all forms of state religion, compulsory observance, and against all religion being taught as doctrine in state schools, while demanding that facilities for private observance, special diets etc are provided for all religious believers. We should NOT be fighting to extend the blasphemy laws for the use of reactionaries (history teaches us it is predominately the progressives' ideas that are banned) but we should be asking for the SCRAPPING of all blasphemy laws. Within this context separate Muslim schools are not a way of fighting racism but of segregating women.

LABOUR PARTY HYPOCRACY IN THEIR QUEST FOR BLACK VOTES:

Recently, Roy Hattersley Deputy leader of the Labour party (and with even less principles than the leader), has come out in favour of Muslim schools. (Hattersley's Birmingham seat has a strong representation of Muslim voters). He has also been joined by Max Madden and Bernie Grant. All of whom have large numbers of Muslim voters in their constituencies. Everyone of these M.P.'s were on record, prior to anti-Rushdie demonstrations, as being opposed to separate Muslim girls schools. Of course their sudden change of mind on this topic

has nothing to do with votes? (It certainly has nothing to do with principles)!

Max Madden, the Labour M.P. for Bradford has real reasons to worry, he was opposed in the 1987 election by Mr. Moghal - S.D.P. and maywell be facing a Muslim sponsored Mr. Moghal at the next election. This explains his about-turn position on the Zakaria Muslim Girls School, in Batley near Bradford.

But even these opportunists have been left standing by the Leicester East M.P. - Keith Vaz, who placed himself at the head of a 3,000 strong anti-Rushdie demonstration in Leicester recently. To hit back at his critics, Keith Vaz has mobilized mosque-based political leaders to unseat black councillors, who publicly oppose 'the campaign to ban Rushdie's book'. These same Muslim leaders in 1983/1984 ensured the closure of the Red Star Asian Youth Centre in Leicester, because it had been the focus of political activity and social life - despite an occupation by Asian youth. The mosque-based leaders in Leicester have also openly stated their opposition to Muslim WOMEN attending political meetings.

Keith Vaz and his mosque-based community leaders are prepared to mobilize against Rushdie and Asian political youth but have adamantly refused to organized against deportations, police racism and racial attacks; as the youth in the Red Star Centre had repeatedly asked them to.

Incidently, Keith Vaz did not utter one word in defence of Sharon Atkin, when Kinnock removed her as Parliamentary candidate in 1987; (for speaking the truth), that the Labour party's immigration policies had been racist. Nor did the other 3 black candidates: Bernie Grant, Paul Boateng and Dianne Abbott. From such expedient starts - they were bound to go far in politics.

C ONCLUSION.

We offer this analysis for several reasons. To counter the racism of the mass media, which is currently engaged in using the Rushdie issue as 'a stick to beat' black people and anti-racists in general, over the head with.

Secondly, to put forward a better understanding of the issues, in particular, the Muslim peoples experience in Britain; as part of a black underclass; which in turn, is part of the wider white working class.

If at times, this analysis appeared contradictory or unclear, then that merely reflects the complexities of the issues involved.

The opportunism of the Labour party however,

is very clear. Whilst the distinctions between black people and Muslims under a racist state are very blurred indeed.

The confusion arises out of black people (faced with the ambivalence of the labour movement), putting their faith in community/religious leaders primarily as black people; and not necessarily, as Muslims.

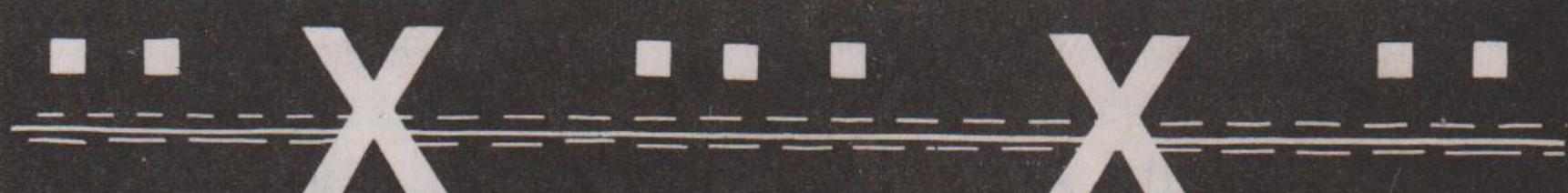
The progressive way forward for the black communities is for their political organisations to consolidate themselves, and to work out their programmes from a class perspective.

This means having our own agenda, but also seeking wherever and whenever possible to make alliances with the wider working class.

Such a black perspective should not be tied to the Labour party, or any other party or religious leaders. It should be a movement that is prepared to actively oppose ALL immigration laws (there is no such thing as a non-racist immigration law); it should fight deportations as part of ALL state attacks; and it must also oppose sexual oppression, and in particular, WOMEN'S oppression. Not with an eye on 'jobs in the Council', or 'Parliamentary seats', but from within a clear class perspective.

Such a movement the S.D.C. would be more than happy in helping to establish.

S.D.C. JUNE 1989.



The S.D.C. acknowledges the depth of insight contained within the square brackets [...] is from a leaflet by the "South Asia Solidarity Group". We are further indebted to information contained within other publications: Daily Jang, 'Freethinker', Workers Power, the Leeds Other Paper and Searchlight.

However, the ideas expressed and the slant given to the above information is entirely our own, and we take full responsibility for them.

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