

Ten years on: remember Stephen Lawrence



Around 350 people packed the TUC conference centre on Saturday 22nd February, to mark the tenth anniversary year of the murder of Stephen Lawrence. Speakers including Stephen Lawrence's mother Doreen Lawrence, TGWU General Secretary Bill Morris, London Mayor Ken Livingstone and TUC General Secretary elect Brendan Barber highlighted the lack of progress in the implementation of the Lawrence Report recommendations. Plenaries and workshops discussed responses to the alarming rise of racism in particular the rise in racism towards the Muslim community and asylum seekers in the context of impending war against Iraq. Family campaigns highlighted their experiences of institutional racism and the urgency of fighting against the advances made by the BNP as the subject of a plenary and a workshop.

Doreen Lawrence raised concerns that since David Blunkett had become Home Secretary 'the government has lost interest on race'. She said that ten years on some things had changed but progress was too slow and urged people to find ways to challenge the government over this. TUC general secretary elect, Brendan Barber stressed importance of the trade union movement responding to the threat posed by the BNP. NAAR secretary Lee Jasper echoed concerns about demonising asylum seekers and linking them to terrorist attacks, pointing out that the last three terrorist bombs in London had in fact been carried out by a fascist against the black and lesbian and gay communities.

A statement from Mal Hussain, the Lancaster shopkeeper, reminded the conference that after twelve years of 'living hell' and 4,000 separate racist attacks - none of the authorities have yet delivered justice.

Cllr Mohammed Azam from Oldham led the discussion on perhaps the most urgent strand running through the day - the need to defeat the BNP. He underlined the need for support in the coming months run up to May's local election where the BNP are up for re-election in Burnley; and flagged up next year's battle in all-out elections in Oldham and elsewhere.

200 Neo nazi candidates for May's local elections

Since the election of the BNP in Mixenden, Halifax, earlier this year, the BNP is threatening to stand candidates in 200 wards across Britain in this year's local elections, compared to 68 in May 2002. This will be their biggest ever electoral assault. Although the exact places the BNP stand will not be known until the announcement of candidates a few weeks before 1 May, they are likely to stand many in the north west and Yorkshire and Humberside. Currently the BNP have 5 councillors: 3 in Burnley, 1 in Blackburn and 1 in Halifax.

The BNP are increasingly becoming a national threat, and will also stand candidates in the north east, Stoke-on-Trent, the Midlands, East Anglia, South West, South and parts of the Home Counties. However they are likely to concentrate in areas in the north such as Oldham, where there are all out elections in May 2004. Racism towards asylum seekers including comments by government ministers and recent articles in the tabloid press will only create fertile ground for the BNP to exploit.

An article in the Sunday Mirror on 16 February noted a number of disturbing incidents including:

- death threats to Martin Salter MP in Berkshire after the BNP put his email address on their website
- racist material given to children outside schools in Sheffield
- a Labour Party office was daubed with BNP graffiti in the area where Stephen Lawrence was murdered
- in Sittingbourne in Kent the BNP have been distributing leaflets near the proposed site of an induction centre for asylum seekers, branding asylum seekers as 'diseased paedophiles'.

In this climate it is extremely important that all those opposed to the BNP and the politics of race hate, vote on May 1st.

The Coalition Against Racism - Unite to Stop the BNP will be organising a series of initiatives including leafleting, days of action, public meetings and more. To get involved and help with activities please contact Cllr Mohammed Azam on 07958 500 570 or contact the NAAR on 020 7247 9907.

Asylum victory at the High Court

Mr Justice Collins described the treatment of the six asylum seekers who had taken the test cases as 'inhuman and unlawful' under the European Convention on Human Rights. The recent victory at the High Court by the asylum seekers who were left utterly destitute following the withdrawal of benefits from so-called in-country applicants was immediately attacked by the Home Secretary, who said he was 'fed up' with the judiciary frustrating Parliament on this issue. The government will be appealing against the ruling.

The withdrawal of benefits was a Tory measure introduced in the 1996 legislation, which was also challenged in court and subsequently overturned.

The cases of the six asylum seekers are shocking they highlight the consequences of the withdrawal of benefits. One was a teenage girl who had been repeatedly raped and beaten before fleeing from her own country. After arriving in Britain, an Iraqi man was forced to spend a night in a telephone box and a tunnel.

The government's attacks on asylum rights have intensified in the recent weeks with the Prime Minister setting a target of cutting the numbers of asylum seekers by half by this September. He also suggested that the British government would sign out of its obligations under Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which restricts the deportation of torture victims back to their country of origin. This would be ruled illegal by courts.

The government is set to continue its tough stance on asylum. This approach means that the issue is kept on the front pages of the tabloid press, leading to further worsening of the climate across the country. With the approaching local elections, racism being whipped up on this issue will help the neo-Nazi BNP. NAAR is planning events in the next few months to promote the campaign for positive asylum rights. For further information, call the office.

Open verdict in Jason McGowan's inquest

The inquest into the death of Jason McGowan who was found hanged from roadside railings in Telford three years ago ended with an open verdict. At the time of the death, it took a senior West Mercia detective less than half an hour to decide he had taken his own life. A subsequent Metropolitan police investigation into the handling of the case forced the police to apologise for their handling of the case.

The family welcomed the outcome of the inquest, stating that this should have been the verdict in Errol McGowan's inquest. Before his death Jason had been investigating the death of his uncle Errol, also found hanged in Telford. Errol had reported to police that he had received racist abuse death threats. An inquest into the death of Errol delivered a hung verdict. The family will be calling for the investigation into Errol's death to be reopened in the light of the open verdict on Jason's death, including the possibility of third party involvement in any investigation.

For more information Contact NAAR or Clifton McGowan on cliff.mc@ic24.net

Respect at the Dome on 19 July 2003

Following the success of last year's Respect festival, the Mayor of London, in conjunction with SERTUC and NAAR, will once again jointly organise Respect 2003 on 19 July at the Dome in Greenwich. Last year, the festival in Victoria Park was attended by over 80,000 people. Hip-hop band De La Soul headlined the festival and other acts included Sister India, Misty in Roots and many more.

The London Assembly Against Racism will be co-ordinating volunteers for the festival, to ensure that the anti racist message gets out on the day and the festival is promoted in the preceding weeks.

For more information contact NAAR or visit www.respectfestival.org.uk

Bradford youths call for justice

The appeals of the young Asian men sentenced to over four years in prison for taking part in the disturbances in Bradford ended with four of them receiving a reduction of their sentences. However, those applying for leave to appeal were all turned down.

The riot charges and heavy sentencing which Asian youths received were on average between four to eight years. White youths involved in similar offences were given lenient charges and reduced sentences or community service.

The campaign welcomed the High Court's acknowledgement of the presence of the far right in Bradford on the day of the disturbances and that the attack on an Asian man in the afternoon had been a major factor to the disturbances. However, they were disappointed that those applying for leave to appeal were turned down.

The campaign will be holding a rally in Bradford' Centenary Square on 15th March. Contact us for more information.

London Schools and the Black Child Conference

Diane Abbott MP is organising the second **London Schools and the Black Child Conference** on Saturday 10 May 2003 at the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre. For more information, contact Reggie Stober on 020 7219 4330 or email stoberr@parliament.uk

War and racism public meeting, 10th March, 7-9pm

Goldsmiths Students Union and Lewisham Anti-Racist Action Group are jointly organising a public meeting on war and racism: defend asylum rights. The meeting will take place at the Goldsmiths Student Union top hall. Speakers include Co-Chair of NAAR Kumar Murshid, representative from Lewisham and Kent Islamic Centre and an asylum seeker. For further information, contact NAAR.

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