

***East End Immigrants and the Battle for Housing:
a comparative study of political mobilisation in the Jewish and Bengali
communities***

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Abstract

Twice in the recent history of the East End of London, the fight for decent housing has become part of a bigger political battle. These two very different struggles are representative of two important periods in radical politics – the class politics, tempered by popular-frontism that operated in the 1930s, and the new social movement politics of the seventies. In the rent strikes of the 1930s the ultimate goal was Communism. Although the local Party was disproportionately Jewish, Communist theory required an outward looking orientation that embraced the whole of the working class. In the squatting movement of the 1970s political organisers attempted to steer the Bengalis onto the path of Black Radicalism, championing separate organisation and turning the community inwards. An examination of the implementation and consequences of these different movements can help us to understand the possibilities and problems for the transformation of grass-roots activism into a broader political force, and the processes of political mobilisation of ethnic minority groups.

Key Words

Tower Hamlets, political mobilisation, oral history, Bengalis, Jews, housing

In London's East End, housing crises are endemic. The fight for adequate and decent housing is fundamental, but for most of those taking part its goals do not extend beyond the satisfaction of housing needs. However there have been times when this fight has become part of a bigger struggle, to change not only government policy, but the nature of politics itself; and in the East End this has been intimately linked to the fight against racism, and immigrants have played a crucial part. This paper looks at two of those times: the late thirties when Stepney's disproportionately Jewish Communist Party led the tenants' movement as part of a wider battle for Communism; and the late seventies when 'black radical' activists attempted to transform Bengali squatters into a broader political force on principles of self-organisation

The tenants' movement was part of a political battle fought on many fronts, but it played a crucial role in bringing the realities of that battle to many ordinary people, Jew and Gentile. The Communist Party's own account of their struggles in the East End was recorded by Phil Piratin, who played a leading role and was elected Communist councillor for Spitalfields East in 1937 and MP for Stepney (Mile End) in 1945. In his book, *'Our Flag Stays Red'*, which is almost a handbook of grassroots activism, Piratin commented:

Looking back, one can truly say that the tenants' and residents' struggles of those days were among the finest in our history... in the course of those months hundreds and thousands of folk, who had mildly carried the burden placed on them, not only rebelled, but began to see who were the exploiters and their real enemies.¹

¹ P. Piratin, *Our Flag Stays Red* (London 1978, first edition 1948) 45-46

The Bengali Housing Action Group (BHAG) was formed forty years later, at the height of the squatters' movement of the seventies. The impetus behind BHAG came from members of the Race Today Collective, and when it was officially constituted, they described it in their journal as 'one of the clearest manifestations of the collective power of black workers'.² But the black radical ideology seemed to get lost in their more immediate concerns over decent safe housing. Mala Sen, one of the key activists, claims only a much more limited success:

We did change people's minds, we did make them feel... a more kind of... community sense rather than an individual sense... I think we achieved a lot, but I think we had a limited agenda. I mean you can't create a world revolution with ghetto politics, and it was ghetto politics... They were taking over their own lives and good luck, that's what we wanted them to do anyway, and we moved onto other things.³

How accurate are these analyses? Why did these two important periods generate such different movements? What are the differences in practice of the class politics, tempered by popular-frontism, of the 1930s, and the new social movement politics of the seventies? And what can this teach us about the political mobilisation of ethnic minority groups?

To try and answer these questions I have pieced together histories of the two movements from a combination of published accounts by the participants, contemporary reports and agitational literature, and interviews with some of those who took part. And I have followed up leads from diverse sources to find people at different levels of involvement.

The Battlefield

Although Piratin makes no mention of it, the East End's first rent battle was part of the wave of strikes that broke out across Britain, and most dramatically in Clydeside, in 1915 - 16, and led to the passing of a Rent Act that froze rents at 1914 levels and gave tenants security of tenure. The Rent Act was prolonged in 1919, but not for new houses, and in 1923 the government allowed rent control to lapse whenever a tenancy became vacant. The rents for decontrolled flats were soon significantly higher than for their controlled neighbours.

The wartime promise of 'homes fit for heroes' produced much rhetoric and hand wringing, but throughout Britain, actual building failed to match the scale of the problem, especially as it affected the lower paid. Stepney housing was among the most overcrowded in London,⁴ and a major survey on the slums carried out by the *Architect's Journal* in 1933 quoted the comment of an L.C.C. official that '[p]ractically all Stepney is a slum.'⁵ During the whole of the 1930s, the borough council and the LCC between them put up only about 2,000 homes in Stepney,⁶ compared to the 14,000 that the Architects' Journal had estimated as necessary in 1933, and private developers contributed just a few small and expensive blocks of flats.

² *Race Today*, March 1976 p53

³ Interviewed 5/11/2001

⁴ The 1931 Census showed that only Shoreditch, Finsbury and Bethnal Green were more overcrowded.

⁵ *The Architects' Journal* 26/10/1933 p531

⁶ D. Munby, *Industry and Planning in Stepney* (Oxford 1951) 93

By the thirties, across the country, groups of tenants were coming together to fight against high rents – and eviction for rent arrears - and for better building maintenance. Sometimes they were assisted by different segments of the organised labour movement, and attempts were being made to link these actions into a broader organisation. The Communist Party was just one of the groups involved, alongside tenants' organisations and trade unionists.

The fledgling movement was given new impetus by the 1933 Rent Act, which legislated for the abolition of rent control after five years, and required the immediate registration of decontrolled flats. Although nothing had yet changed, the huge numbers of fraudulent registrations of flats that were still legally controlled drew attention to the prevalence of illegal overcharging. Tenants' associations took law-breaking landlords to court,⁷ and a campaign was started for the extension of the Rent Act, which eventually persuaded the government to prolong rent control on the least valuable houses until 1942. But the law was of no help to those in decontrolled tenancies or anyone whose rent was exorbitant but nevertheless legal. Then the only hope of redress was through direct action.

The Communist Campaign

Piratin's account of the tenants' movement can be criticised for being oversimplified, especially to the exclusion of activity outside Stepney and the Party. And although it is made to appear a seamless part of the Communist battle plan, at the time the significance of the tenants' movement and its relationship to the class struggle remained the subject of critical debate. Jack Shapiro - who was then a Party activist and recalls campaigns organised from his family home as early as 1933, before Piratin's story begins - also remembers a long analytical discussion in the Party's London District Office as late as 1938, when the line was put forward that the movement 'could have meaning for developing people who could come into the class struggle, but wasn't the class struggle itself'.⁸

However, the political importance of the movement was soon to be demonstrated. The rapid growth and consolidation of activity in Stepney in 1939 made this period qualitatively different from what had gone before. The significance of the story Piratin tells depends partly on this, but also on his explanation of the way the fight was eventually developed so that it could be used to do more than just improve housing conditions, although it did that too.

It is not uncommon [he wrote] for Communists to become so submerged in the work of tenants' associations that they lose their identity. This was not the case in Stepney... we saw our main job in relation to the tenants in assisting them in every way... and explaining to the people the broader political implications of what they were doing.⁹

The Communists believed that only through struggle would the workers develop the class consciousness that could eventually bring into being a Communist state, and that without Communism no significant and permanent change to society was possible. While outsiders might interpret their actions as the opportunistic use of people's grievances, the Communists would

⁷ There were weekly legal articles in the *Daily Worker*, 8th September – 13th October 1934

⁸ interviewed 26/6/2002

⁹ Piratin *op cit* 48-9

argue that they were enabling people to find the only real solution to society's inequalities.

The Communist Party in the East End of the Thirties was able to develop an exceptionally dominant position, with a semi-mass base.¹⁰ New movements - the fight against fascism (which was linked to the Aid for Spain movement) and the fight for better housing - were bringing in new people and a new sense of purpose.

As Piratin wrote, 'Only the Communist Party stood out as a forthright opponent of Fascism'.¹¹ The official line of the Labour Party was that direct confrontation with the fascists was to be avoided, and that if they were not provoked they would disappear; but such tactics gave no comfort to those facing daily fascist harassment. Their problem was only addressed by the generally Communist-run vigilantes. In fact, despite a right-wing local leadership, a sizeable section of the East End Labour Party was prepared to stray from the official party line and work alongside the Communists;¹² however, many people did not regard the Labour Party as a place from which to fight fascism.¹³

Although the Jewish turn towards Communism was encouraged to a large extent as a reaction to the rise of fascism internationally and locally, that does not mean that it can be dismissed as an 'infatuation', as Geoffrey Alderman attempts to do.¹⁴ Those who became interested in Communism through the fight against fascism were given plenty of opportunity to find out what the Party stood for, and the glaring social inequalities that surrounded them provided a powerful argument in themselves. The party could also build on a strong radical Left tradition within the community, even if it was only ever followed by a minority - a tradition that went back to Jewish involvement in the Socialist movements of pre-revolutionary Russia.

Exactly what proportion of the '500-strong'¹⁵ Stepney Communist Party was Jewish is not clear, especially as distinctions of race were not something that the party wished to highlight. Jews formed less than half of Stepney's population,¹⁶ but Max Levitas, who was very active in the Stepney party and the tenants' movement, and after the war became a long-standing Communist councillor, remembers that the 'vast majority' of party members were Jewish, and other memories support this.¹⁷ The Jewish community was still very separate socially, but the Communist Party introduced young Jews to a wider world, as they campaigned outside the old boundaries and sang Irish songs with their Catholic comrades.¹⁸

¹⁰ See N. Branson and M. Heinemann, *Britain in the Nineteen Thirties* (London 1971) 197 - 198

¹¹ Piratin *op cit* 17

¹² For the position of the Labour Party, see C. Knowles, *Labour and anti-Semitism: An account of the political discourse surrounding the Labour Party's involvement with anti-Semitism in East London, 1934-6*, in R. Miles and A. Phizacklea (Eds), *Racism and political action in Britain* (London 1979) 50-71

¹³ See Bertha Sokoloff, interviewed 6/11/ 2001. She joined the YCL and later became one of the Communist councillors elected after the war.

¹⁴ G. Alderman, *The Jewish Community in British Politics* (Oxford 1983) 117

¹⁵ 1939 figure given by Piratin, *op cit* 49. The London District Secretary's report for March 1938 claimed that membership had risen from 30 to 137 in a year (CPGB Archive, National Museum of Labour History).

¹⁶ *The New Survey of London Life and Labour* VolVI (London 1934) 293 estimated that 43% of the families in its house sample taken in Stepney in 1929-30 were Jewish.

¹⁷ Levitas interviewed 15/8/01, Bertha Sokoloff interviewed 6/11/01, Jack Cigman interviewed 2/10/01. Sokoloff and Cigman were members of the YCL.

¹⁸ See interview with Jack Shapiro, 8/10/2002

Joe Jacobs' autobiographical account of his years in the Stepney Communist Party allows the reader to see the passion and frustrations of life as an active comrade, and how Communist organisation worked on the ground. It provides an important corrective to the neat teleology of Piratin's account, and a strong criticism of Party structures; but it shares *Our Flag*'s arguments about the role of grass-roots movements, while pointing out that the official vision was not always so clear. The Party expected complete dedication and unquestioning acceptance of the official line, and Jacobs, in his devotion to the revolution, questioned Party tactics. His disagreements with the Party - which ended in his expulsion - were centred on whether emphasis should be given to entrust work in the organised labour movement or to 'street work' among the unorganised masses. He was caricatured as only interested in fighting fascist thugs, but in the statement he wrote in the summer of 1937 to defend his position to the Party, he protested that Mosley was continuing to find support both because the Party had dropped its militant resistance to fascist meetings, and because 'we have not systematically led the workers on their immediate demands social and economic'. And, though the higher echelons of the Party would continue to debate its political significance, he included in this the demands for better housing.¹⁹ The housing struggles proved just the type of mass mobilisation that Jacobs had identified as needed - but by the time they became an important political factor he was no longer in the party.

The fight against fascism and the fight for better housing boosted each other. People were drawn into the Communist Party by the fight against fascism, and, through the party, they helped to organise the attack on housing conditions. The fight for better housing brought everyone together, Jew and Gentile, to attack the social and economic causes on which fascism thrives. It was a virtuous cycle.

Piratin's account of his own early involvement in housing issues in the autumn of 1934 is presented as a lesson (to himself as well as to others) in grass-roots activism. He describes how he was wandering around Fieldgate Mansions looking for a local issue on which to campaign when he spotted open gas flares on the staircases. When, earlier, he had asked people generally if they had any problems they had not been able to come up with anything, but now when he asked them specifically about the dangers of these gas flares 'immediately I received a torrent of information, and a cursing of the landlord. *I had found "an issue"!*' The Party's campaign included letters to the press and to the landlord - pointing out that he would be held responsible for any casualties - and electric lighting was quickly installed. But this was not the ultimate aim, and Piratin wanted everyone to learn from his mistakes:

We never got the tenants to feel they were doing it for themselves. We never held one public meeting among the tenants to explain the political lessons of the whole campaign...²⁰

Despite these omissions, the story of Fieldgate Mansions illustrates how grass-roots housing work can be pro-active and not simply re-active, to the benefit of both the tenants and the political organisers. Piratin's next example of work with tenants dates from June 1937.²¹ The battle site was Paragon Mansions in Mile End, which had an active tenants' committee and

¹⁹ J. Jacobs, *Out of the Ghetto: My Youth in the East End. Communism and Fascism 1913-1939* (London 1978) 280 - 282

²⁰ Piratin *op cit* 36 - 37

²¹ *Ibid* 28 - 32

Communist sympathisers among the tenants, but the immediate concern was the threatened eviction of two families who had no connection with the committee. When Piratin went to see them he discovered that this was because they were both members of the British Union of Fascists, which had done nothing to help them. This provided a perfect opportunity to demonstrate the strength of working class unity and of the Communist Party and to discredit the fascists. Under Communist leadership, the tenants united to barricade the block against the bailiffs and police, and armed themselves with mouldy flour and pails of water, and during the lunch hour Piratin held an impromptu meeting outside to explain to the passing workers what was happening. The uncomfortable mixture of flour and water and public antipathy persuaded the bailiffs to hold off for a fortnight to allow further negotiations with the landlord. And most importantly, as Piratin later wrote,

We were now supplementing our propaganda with positive action. The kind of people who would never come to our meetings, and had strange ideas about Communists and Jews, learnt the facts overnight...²²

By the autumn, tenants' committees were 'acting as a kind of shop stewards' committee and dealing direct with the landlord',²³ and, in a deliberate attempt to break down ethnic barriers, the Party concentrated on the areas in which the fascists had most support.

The next set battle was fought in August 1938 in neighbouring Bethnal Green, in Quinn Square at the heart of the fascist area. It was led by the Communist, Bob Graves, secretary of the Tenants' Association, but also received support from Labour Party activists. The catalyst was attempted evictions. The committee that formed found that most controlled tenants were being illegally over-charged, but they agreed to fight for fair rents for everyone - controlled and decontrolled tenants. A mass meeting of tenants decided on a rent strike, and after two weeks the owners conceded to their demands.²⁴

Quinn Square had taken the fight to a new level. An appeal put out by the Poplar Tenants' Defence League explained, 'They have shown what even decontrolled tenants who are not protected by the Rent Acts can do.'²⁵ Piratin describes the impatience of the Stepney comrades waiting for the strategic sites to be chosen for their own battles to begin. Once these had started in late November 1938, 'the flood-gates opened'²⁶ releasing a strike wave that had repercussions well beyond Stepney. How much, outside Stepney, the Communist Party was propelling this wave is not always clear, but it was most certainly riding it.

As the momentum grew, some of the canner landlords chose to negotiate and sign collective agreements before strike action could be organised, and others recognised defeat after a week or two; but the owners of Langdale and Brady Mansions held out for 21 weeks.²⁷ When they obtained court orders to have the striking tenants evicted, the barricades went up. Max Levitas, who lived in Brady Mansions and was convenor of the strike committees, explained in a recent interview how such strikes demonstrated another aspect of class unity:

²² *Ibid* 32

²³ *Ibid* 39

²⁴ B. Graves, *Quinn Square Tenants' Rent Strike Victory* (London 1938)

²⁵ Quoted in *East End News* 16th September 1938

²⁶ Piratin *op cit* 40

²⁷ The strike is described in Piratin *op cit* 43 - 44 and Branson and Heinemann *op cit* 199 - 200

We were fighting the Jewish landlords the same way as we'd fight any landlord that increases rents, doesn't care if he repairs flats, so forth and so on: these are the enemies of the people...²⁸

The strikes also proved the determination of the women, who bore the brunt of these struggles and sometimes found themselves picketing through weeks of winter cold. In fact the Communists saw this movement as a possible way of recruiting more women members.²⁹ Levitas, who met his wife through the strike, tells of the Brady women throwing down 'hot water, hot potatoes, hot coals' on police and bailiffs attempting to storm their barricades over the roof of a neighbouring garage.³⁰

When the Second World War began, the movement was still gaining in strength. The government, mindful of events in the 1914-18 war, brought in an emergency statute to tie all rents to September 1939 levels.

Father Groser, vicar of Christ Church Watney Street and a strong Socialist but not a Communist, became president of the Stepney League in 1938. He recorded in his autobiographical memoir how the tenants' movement revitalised people from the defeatism of the depression years by showing them 'a possible way out of at least one of their problems'; and he described his amazement at 'the speed with which people came together, organised, and threw up their own leaders'. While assuring his readers that 'in spite of all their sufferings the masses generally were still far from accepting the Communist philosophy' he conceded,

I sometimes wonder what would have happened if the war had not come when it did. Things were pretty desperate. It is just possible that the workers would have turned to open revolutionary activity and looked to the Communist Party for leadership. Certainly there were a great many who were thinking that way and looking in that direction for guidance.³¹

What sort of British revolution would have been possible through the 1930s Communist Party may, of course, be debated.

The Popular Front

The hand of the Comintern always hovered over local activists, and from 1933, in response to the rise of fascism, this meant them making an about turn towards a Popular Front. For the Communists, this strategy of forming coalitions with non-Communists ran a double risk: they would be helping to generate support for the other parties with whom they worked (Labour gained support in many places where it was involved in the rent struggle); and even within their own ranks the fight against fascism or for immediate social issues could take precedence over the fight to transform society, amounting to a move away from revolutionary class politics.

Popular Frontist ideas continued after the war, despite the defeat of the fascist threat, to the frustration and disillusionment of many Party members. Piratin had been concerned that the Communists should not lose their identity under the immediate demands of the tenants'

²⁸ Interviewed Autumn 1999

²⁹ See the *Daily Worker* 6/10/1934.

³⁰ Interviewed 15/8/2001

³¹ StJ. B. Groser, *Politics and Persons* (London 1949) 73 and 75

movement, but the policy under which he stood for election in 1945 was far from revolutionary. In fact, as he himself explained, 'essentially, as understood by the electors, it was not so very different from that of the Labour Party.'³² For the Stepney Borough Council elections, the Communists even attempted (without success) to make an electoral agreement with the Labour Party in the name of working-class unity.³³

Piratin was elected Communist MP for Stepney (Mile End) in July, and four months later all ten Communist candidates were elected to the Borough Council. Its grass-roots campaigns for better housing and against fascism, and later for proper air-raid shelters, had given the party enormous credibility. In contrast, the local Labour Party was seen as corrupt and grossly inefficient, and the incumbent Labour MP (also a Jew) was portrayed as distant and unconcerned with the issues that affected his constituents. There were good local reasons to vote Communist in Stepney - and the importance of the local base is upheld by the low electoral support for Piratin among the soldiers, who were less in touch with local issues though just as aware of Russia's role in the war.³⁴

Henry Srebrnik, who stresses the ethnic dimension of the elections, has pointed out that, Mile End behaved ... like those demographically similar Jewish neighbourhoods in the United States, Canada, South Africa and elsewhere, which also voted Communist in the immediate post-war period.³⁵

Throughout Britain, only one other Communist MP was elected in 1945, and the Communist Party, although emphasising working class unity, was aware of the importance of the Jewish vote. However this was not simply an ethnic vote of Jews voting for a Jew-friendly party. Estimates for the proportion of the Mile End electorate that was Jewish vary from a third (Geoffrey Alderman) to between 40 and 50% (Srebrnik).³⁶ Piratin won on 47.6% of the vote, and as a fair proportion of Jews must have voted Labour, so a fair proportion of non-Jews must have voted Communist. That would be in line with the voting for the Borough Council, where Srebrnik records that Communist candidates did spectacularly well in the Mile End ward that was more than 3/4 Jewish, but that even in Mile End North, where Jews made up only 28% of the electorate, the two Communist candidates put Labour in third place.³⁷

This is not to claim that the majority of those who voted for Piratin and the ten councillors would have thought of themselves as Communists. The Communists were fighting on their record as activists, campaigners and, in Piratin's case, as a councillor. The vote is a testimony to grass-roots politics, but, as Groser observed, revolutionary ideas were in the air. In the end the Communist Party itself directed them into safe reformist channels. Whether a more revolutionary party could have turned this situation into a mass movement can only be guessed.

Both the strengths and weaknesses of Communist popular frontism are demonstrated by the example of Lew Cherley.³⁸ Cherley 'tried to be... non-political'. He was more interested in

³² Piratin *op cit* 79

³³ *Ibid* 84 – 85

³⁴ H. F. Srebrnik, *London Jews and British Communism 1935-1945* (Ilford 1995) 141

³⁵ *Ibid* 142

³⁶ Alderman *op cit* 196 and Srebrnik *op cit* 132

³⁷ Srebrnik *op cit* 150 and 211 – 212

³⁸ Interviewed 1/5/2001

playing cards, though like so many others he came out to defend Cable Street. He discovered the Tenants' Defence League when they looked at the possibility of having a rent strike in the buildings where he lived, and when this did not materialise due to insufficient support in his small block, he became involved in the strike at nearby Langdale Mansions. Cherley recalled 'it was a great success, and after that I decided I would like to be an activist'. In fulfilment of his new role he 'used to stand on the corner of Cannon Street Road and Commercial Road selling dog results slips on one hand and the *Daily Worker* on the other hand.' In 1945 he voted for Piratin: 'No question about it'. Cherley was never a Communist, but the tenants' movement had radicalised him, and when, after the war, a friend asked him if he was interested in forming a Tenants' Association on the new Ocean Estate, then, as he explained, 'having become an activist, I said yes'. And he was still battling for the tenants of the Ocean Estate at the age of 85, when I met him at a 'New Deal for Communities' committee meeting in 2001, a few months before his death.

The Post-War Battlefield

The devastation of the Blitz hastened the onward migration of the East End Jewish population, and by the time significant numbers of Bengali immigrants began arriving from the late fifties, so the number of Jews was dwindling, with those who remained getting increasingly elderly. Architecturally, grand plans for post-war reconstruction had soon become pared down to piecemeal redevelopment that fell far short of housing needs, and many of the areas that had survived the bombing, such as that around Brick Lane, were sinking into further disrepair. By the end of the sixties, the housing battle was being fought on three fronts. GLC tenants were resisting council rent rises; tenants of the worst slum areas were fighting for the councils to use their powers of compulsory purchase and redevelopment to provide them with new housing; and political activists had helped to launch a major squatting movement throughout London, in which Tower Hamlets, formed in 1965 from the amalgamation of Stepney, Poplar, and Bethnal Green, was destined to play an important part. The last two fights were intimately connected because the emptying of the old slums and the councils' tardiness in renovation or redevelopment meant that there were numerous places available for the squatters to move into. Sometimes council officials from both the GLC (who owned 3 in 5 local authority houses in Tower Hamlets) and the borough council found themselves re-housing different people from the same houses and tenements again and again. By the mid seventies a large majority of Tower Hamlets residents lived in public sector housing,³⁹ but very little had been built in Spitalfields, at the heart of the Bengali area, even after slums had been cleared. In the fights of both the slum tenants and the squatters, Bengalis played a significant part.

The Bengalis

By the mid seventies, Tower Hamlets' Bengali community was growing rapidly, mainly through the arrival of wives and children from Bangladesh, but also with earlier immigrants who had moved on from the recession-hit towns of the Midlands and the North.⁴⁰ Like the Jews before them, the Bengalis crowded together, relying on their own community networks for the infrastructure of daily life and for physical protection. Like the Jews, they crowded into

³⁹ The census records 67% of households in council housing in 1971 and 82% by 1981

⁴⁰ In the 1971 census 3,560 residents of Tower Hamlets gave their country of birth as Pakistan. These would have been predominantly Bengalis, and included only 470 women. By 1981 there were 12,596 people living in households whose head was born in what is now Bangladesh.

Spitalfields, close to the docks, the point of arrival for the earlier immigrants from Eastern Europe and for the *lascars* (seamen) who became the first Bengali settlers. The Brick Lane area presented them with a warren of workshops and privately rented old houses and tenements that had deteriorated to such a state that no one would choose to live in them. When it was just men sharing together it was bad enough - at least they could spend most of their time elsewhere - but now the situation was getting desperate, and even more overcrowded. Descriptions of the cramped conditions, the inadequate and broken sanitary arrangements, the rats that bit children in their sleep, seem as if they came from the pages of Dickens.⁴¹

There was urgent need for more accommodation, and the Bengalis faced more than their share of problems. First there was discrimination in council house allocations. Much of this was built into the system, but a lot was due to conscious or unconscious prejudice and assumption. An independent report commissioned by the GLC in 1983-4 gives a picture of deep-seated racism in the housing bureaucracy;⁴² a view confirmed by the experience of the squatting activist, Terry Fitzpatrick. He recalls accompanying a Bengali to request a transfer away from the terrorism of racist neighbours, only to be told that the requested empty flat was 'for white people'.⁴³ Further, the danger of racist violence on outlying white estates meant that re-housing in the Spitalfields area came to be seen as a matter of survival. As a contemporary report pointed out, housing officers' original biased allocations reinforced this racism because they 'gave those white families the feeling that they had the "right" to keep their estates white'.⁴⁴ Many Bengali families who were allocated council housing on white estates returned to Spitalfields preferring to face the extreme discomfort of a squat to the constant danger of racist attack.

In his account of the squatters' movement of the late sixties and early seventies,⁴⁵ Ron Bailey described how small groups of activists such as himself worked together with families from some of the worst slums who were desperate for somewhere decent to live. Through persistent squatting and careful use of the law and the media they forced councils all over London to accept the idea of using their empty housing stock as short-life accommodation. These first squatters were generally young and white; the Bengali squats could be described as part of a second phase of the movement.

At first there was no wider organisation – just individual Bengali families breaking into some of the many derelict houses that dotted the area or paying 'key money' to white squatters who were moving elsewhere. Some ended up as squatters by accident, having been conned into 'buying' or 'renting' a place in what turned out to be an empty council house.⁴⁶ Information about squatting spread by word of mouth, and people soon discovered that if they wanted practical advice the man to see was Terry Fitzpatrick of the Squatters' Union in his squat in Aston Street. (Much of this account is put together from interviews with Fitzpatrick and with

⁴¹ See, for example, the description of Sheba Street in *SHAPRS Six-Month Report*, November 1979 p9

⁴² D. Philips, *What Price Equality? A report on the allocation of GLC housing in Tower Hamlets GLC Housing Research & Policy Report No.9* (1986)

⁴³ Interviewed 23/8/2001

⁴⁴ *SHAPRS Annual Report* December 1983 p 4

⁴⁵ R. Bailey *The Squatters* (Harmondsworth 1973)

⁴⁶ *Race Today* September 1974 and August 1975 and *BBC Nationwide* shown 26/9/1975. Also discussed in an interview with Caroline Adams 13/12/2000

Mala Sen, formerly Dhondy.)⁴⁷ Fitzpatrick, a trained builder with ‘sort of anarchist’ politics of ‘self help’, knew how to break into buildings, to carry out basic repairs – and replace fittings often deliberately destroyed by the council, and how to get round the law. He recalls that they would break into a house with the family ready outside in a van. Then they would change the lock and put up the phone numbers of the Aston Street squat and the Tower Hamlets Law Centre, along with a copy of the Forcible Entry Act of 1381 to make clear that it was illegal to break into the house to evict the occupants.

The Advance of Black Radicalism

The squats acquired a political dimension one evening in January 1975 when Mala and Farrukh Dhondy and another member of the Race Today Collective knocked on the Aston Street door and joined the squatters’ weekly meeting. The Collective produced a campaigning journal *Race Today*, edited by Darcus Howe, which was in the vanguard of black radicalism, and argued that black consciousness should be the primary basis for political mobilisation. Black radical ideology developed out of the interaction between Communist Popular Frontism and anti-colonial and black rights movements, whose leaders were regarded by the Communists as a ‘progressive bourgeois’. It was a formative strand of the New Left that developed from criticism of tendencies towards mechanicism and excessive structuralism *within* Marxism, to criticism of Marxism itself. Black Radicalism disputed Marx’s argument that the primary division in society is class, based upon ownership of the means of production, and that revolution must come initially and finally from the proletariat united against the exploiting capitalist classes. Socialist revolution remained the ultimate aim, but the autonomous black revolution had to come first, and would help to bring it about. Working-class unity was postponed. In this version of the ‘stages theory’ the majority of the working class was temporarily excluded from the equation altogether.

Race Today had already become involved, through their journal, in exposing a squat selling racket in Matlock Street.⁴⁸ As Indian professionals, the Dhondys had little in common with most of the Bengali squatters, but they could speak North Indian Languages (Mala is Bengali, though not Sylheti), and they and Fitzpatrick recognised each other as serious activists. Initially, organisation was on an informal basis as the squatting snowballed into a ‘nightly occurrence’.⁴⁹

Race Today attempted to turn the squatters into a movement for black self-organisation. Like the Communist Party in the thirties, they saw the housing struggles, and the related fight against racism, as a step towards something bigger. Some of the Bengalis already belonged to general squatters’ organisations, but in February 1976 Fitzpatrick and the Dhondy’s brought together a meeting of ‘seventy heads of Bengali families’,⁵⁰ some of them already squatting and others who hoped to do so, and the Bengali Housing Action Group, BHAG, was officially launched. During the course of the meeting Fitzpatrick was eyeing the empty bulk of Pelham Buildings, which was waiting GLC redevelopment. On Easter Saturday, he, Farrukh Dhondy and six Bengali families broke into the building, and within three months 41 families were installed

⁴⁷ Terry Fitzpatrick was interviewed 23/8/2001 and 20/11/2001 and Mala Sen was interviewed 5/11/2001. I will refer to her by her first name to avoid confusion.

⁴⁸ *Race Today* September 1974

⁴⁹ Fitzpatrick, interviewed 23/8/2001

⁵⁰ *Race Today* March 1976 p 52

there. This became BHAG's fortress – literally so when the skinhead gangs went on the attack – and also an inspiration to other Bengali squatters, some formally connected with BHAG, others not. At its peak BHAG was probably several hundred families strong.⁵¹

Despite Race Today's rhetoric, for most of those involved, the turn towards separate Bengali organisation seems to have been accepted as pragmatic rather than ideological. The Squatters' Union anyway already worked more or less exclusively with Bengalis.⁵² Abbas Uddin (now leader of Tower Hamlets Council) was, with his parents, one of the first Bengali squatters and later became secretary of BHAG. He recalls that he saw separate organisation as a reflection of the Bengalis' exceptional housing need as 'one of the most disadvantaged communities' who were 'not currently being catered for'. To him, '[BHAG] wasn't a group of radical activists who had an agenda against any particular political grouping.'⁵³ Fitzpatrick didn't have to grapple with the anomaly of being a white organiser in a black movement because he saw it as a practical thing. He was helping people with distinctive social needs who happened to be Bengali families.

BHAG was a movement for self-organisation organised by outsiders. External leadership need not necessarily be a problem, but there was resistance in the community to the idea of working with outsiders, and a suspicion that they must have ulterior motives. Sunahwar Ali, then a young activist working with BHAG and outside it and now in charge of Tower Hamlets Homeless Families Campaign, comments:

There was a lot of hostility ... A lot of people felt [Race Today] helped; a lot of people thought they were making name for and fame for themselves...⁵⁴

It seems that Fitzpatrick, who moved into Pelham Buildings and was visibly giving all his time to the campaign, was more easily accepted as part of the community.

In the beginning, Fitzpatrick was sometimes viewed as the council's official Housing Manager for Bengalis,⁵⁵ but active Bengali involvement increased, both among the squatters themselves and the newly mobilised youth. Abbas recalls that Bengalis took little part in the initial running of BHAG, but by the end, when he was its 17-year-old secretary, 'it became a Bengali managed organisation with support from non-Bengali members'.⁵⁶ However, it is clear that Fitzpatrick and Mala Dhondy's roles remained crucial, especially when it came to building work or dealing with the authorities or the media. Their control was challenged at one point in 1977,⁵⁷ but it is not difficult to understand why the majority of members, demonstrating no lack of political maturity, chose to reject arguments for Bengali leadership and stay with their proven leaders: though this incident does illustrate a possible trap for those arguing for the self-organisation of others.

⁵¹ C. Forman, *Spitalfields: a battle for land* (London 1989) 82

⁵² M. Phillips, *Homelessness and Tenants' Control: Struggles for Council housing in Tower Hamlets 1974-1976* (London 1977) 45

⁵³ Interviewed 10/10/2001

⁵⁴ Interviewed 23/1/2001

⁵⁵ M. Phillips *op cit* p 46

⁵⁶ Interviewed 10/10/2001

⁵⁷ Interviews with Terry Fitzpatrick, 23/8/2001 and with a Bengali activist who asked to remain anonymous 12/10/2001

Most Bengali women were not allowed to take part in activities outside the home and family, but despite, or even because of, these restrictions they more than played their part. Charlie Forman, who was himself involved as a housing campaigner from 1979, observed:

[I]t has been women who have been most militant about staying in the Spitalfields area. They stand to lose more than their men, and have frequently dissuaded the men from signing for distant flats even when there is apparently no other choice.⁵⁸

As in the thirties, the battle for housing was intimately linked to the fight against racism on the streets. In 1976 Race Today was instrumental in organising the Anti-Racist Committee of Asians in East London (ARC-AEL), which rejected as useless the older generation's appeals to seek recourse through official channels, and organised their own vigilante patrols. Mala recalls:

We had the most militant wing of organisations in the area, with the majority of the Bengali community on our side. We used to run patrol groups at night, vigilantes, to stop stray Bengalis being attacked.⁵⁹

This movement played a significant role in mobilising the community. Caroline Adams, who as a dedicated youth-worker was an important figure for a whole generation of young Bengalis, wrote:

ARCAEL and the activity around it transformed the consciousness of many young people... The Bengali community had come of age and could no longer be patronised or ignored, at least not without a comeback.⁶⁰

There is no shortage of testimonies to the part played by the struggles for decent housing and against racism in the mobilisation of a generation of Bengali youth – the generation that now occupies many of the seats on Tower Hamlets Council and runs many of the campaigning and community groups. For council leader Abbas, his time in BHAG was ‘when I became politically aware of my role and the part I can play’.⁶¹ Many of today's ‘community leaders’, even if they did not get involved with BHAG directly, felt its influence in the campaigns of the late 70s.

Contradictions

BHAG demanded not only the permanent re-housing of all its members, but also that Bengalis be given the option of housing in the safe area of E1. Fitzpatrick ‘lost count’ of the number of rent books he gave back to the council as families fled the dangers of outlying GLC estates to squat in the relative safety of the Bengali dominated areas. In 1977 the new Tory GLC announced that they would restore law and order in housing by declaring an amnesty for all squatters who registered before a fixed date, promising that they could stay on as licensed tenants until they were given a single take-it-or-leave-it offer of GLC accommodation. A BHAG deputation went to meet the council officer in charge expecting to have to fight for their position, and were ‘gob smacked’ when he suggested that they draw up a list of acceptable estates.⁶² Fitzpatrick and two Bengali activists drew up a list of thirteen possible estates in which no reasonable offer would be

⁵⁸ Forman *op cit* p 54

⁵⁹ Interviewed 5/11/2001

⁶⁰ C. Adams, The Spitalfields Bengali Action Group and the Kobi Nazrul Centre 1974-78 (MS. Avenues Unlimited 1979), quoted in K. Leech, *Brick Lane 1978: The events and their significance* (London 1994, first edition 1980) 22. The Bethnal Green and Stepney Trades Council report, *Blood on the Streets* (1978) 55, also noted that, ‘A new spirit of determination and defiance emerged round the ARCAEL Committee’, though the racist attacks continued.

⁶¹ Interviewed 10/10/2001

⁶² Terry Fitzpatrick, interviewed 23/8/2001

refused, which was agreed at a squatters' meeting. A similar demand was taken up by Bengali tenants campaigning for slum clearance and re-housing, though they reduced the list to eight.⁶³

It was demands such as these that led to what has come to be known as the 'ghetto plan'. A GLC housing document dated 22nd May 1978 explained about the estate lists and suggested that, ...we might continue to meet the wishes of the Bengali community by earmarking blocks of flats or, indeed a whole estate if necessary, for their community, *provided* the existing tenants wish to move away and could be given the necessary transfers.⁶⁴

The media outcry should have been predictable.⁶⁵ BHAG had never demanded exclusive Bengali blocks, but its ideological leaders did not agree with the press criticism. As Mala explains:

Some people said, "You are creating a ghetto". We said, "fine, we prefer the ghetto, at least you have each other to defend yourself"... So that's what it was and we achieved it, and today you walk round Brick Lane, it's totally Bengali.⁶⁶

However this was not the tone taken by most local activists, including many of those whose political initiation was through BHAG. Kenneth Leech, then Rector of St Matthew's Bethnal Green, described in his account of the events how the protest meetings that followed brought together whites and Bengalis and 'forged a new unity between various groups'.⁶⁷ Leech went on to quote a letter from the Bangladesh Youth Movement to the leader of the GLC, in which they demonstrated their rejection of black separatist ideology and protested 'against dangerous separatist housing policies, which would ruin existing and developing relationships between the communities and isolate the Bengali community as a target of violence'.⁶⁸

For those who promote self-organisation from the outside, nothing in their organisation becomes them like the leaving it – after their job is done. As Mala puts it,

When you are a political activist, you empower other people to take their chance to empower themselves. Once they have empowered themselves, you say, "Okay sweetie, now it's your household, you look after it, I'm going."⁶⁹

When BHAG petered out at the end of the seventies its organisers could justifiably say they had played their part in empowering a generation of Bengalis, but was this the 'collective power of black workers' they had originally spoken of? BHAG had broken with *Race Today* in 1977, and Darcus Howe used the journal to pour scorn on the organisation's achievements. In a tirade in which he accused them of 'recreating, in a squalid ghetto block, some of the feudal relations of the Asian village', he blamed their failures on 'a total pre-occupation with the tactics of squatting'⁷⁰ – just the mistake Piratin had congratulated the Stepney Communists on avoiding. There had been no time given to the discussion of political ideology. Every minute had been taken up in routine practicalities and managing endless crises: everyone had to be persuaded to

⁶³ Forman *op cit* 84 - 86

⁶⁴ Quoted in Leech *op cit* 13

⁶⁵ The first shot was fired by the *Observer*, 4/6/1978

⁶⁶ Interviewed 5/11/2001

⁶⁷ Leech *op cit* 13

⁶⁸ *Ibid* 14. The letter is dated 7/6/1978

⁶⁹ Interviewed 5/11/2001

⁷⁰ *Race Today*, July/August 1978 p 110

stay on board and not be tempted to sell their squat on at a profit, some people were keeping others awake machining in their flats through the night, and there were always building repairs. At squatters' meetings the correct division of the shared electricity bill had been more urgent than debates over black power.

At the same time, BHAG had been dismissive of what *Race Today* called the 'white Left' and had not attempted to link housing problems and racism to issues beyond the Bengali community. This was grass-roots politics with the politics reduced to a poorly defined identification of Bengalis as a deprived community that needed to help itself.

From Battlefield to Council Chamber

BHAG's followers had learned to fight, only to strive for a greater share of the establishment cake, which they generally attempted to do through the mainstream labour movement that BHAG itself had turned its back on. The youth were mobilised, but with nowhere new to go. The Bangladesh Youth Movement, which nurtured many of today's Bengali political leaders, typified the new groups in its lack of a radical philosophy – it even described itself as 'non-political'⁷¹ – and its failure to challenge the established order as the Black Radicals had hoped.

Most Bengali activists, trained on this politics of community action, took a pragmatic and community-centred line, and wanted to help their fellow Bengalis the most efficient way possible. Some chose to work with organisations such as Spitalfields Housing and Planning Rights Service (SHAPRS), set up with regeneration money in 1979; but often the next step after the youth movements was joining the Labour Party, because that was where the power was. And, despite their move to mainstream politics, the new party members generally continued to see themselves as representatives of the Bengali community.

The housing struggle not only improved living conditions and left the Bengali community unique among ethnic minority groups in the proportion living in council housing; it also helped to involve a great many people in local activism and politics. However, contrary to BHAG's founding aims, they have kept well within the established system.

Comparing the Campaigns

A comparison of the campaigns is not simply a juxtaposition of two opposites. The same ideas that diluted the revolutionary class politics of the earlier period gave birth to the theories of black radicalism that fragmented the hopes of another generation of activists into a hundred committee rooms. However, taken together, both periods have important lessons for today, and a world where ethnic organisation is being actively encouraged, the far right is finding new converts, and so much of the left has lost its way.

Although the vote for Piratin had been no revolution – and the earlier battle had also petered out in the council chamber – in 1930s Stepney, radical politics had entered the consciousness of large numbers of people. Communist views were regularly discussed in the street, and the rent strikes played a major part in bringing people within their orbit. In the squatters' movement of the seventies there was plenty of action, but it failed to coalesce into any sort of coherent radical political force. Why?

⁷¹ *BYM Annual Report 1982-83*

Before interrogating the different ideas and practices, it is important to acknowledge the objective factors that shaped and restricted organisation in the later period. At that time the Bengalis were relatively new immigrants. There was a huge language barrier between them and other East Enders, and a high level of ignorance about and antipathy towards these newest residents, which made joint action difficult.⁷² By the thirties, the Jews were established in the area, although they were still resented, and Jews and Gentiles shared a common experience of East End slum life. The seclusion of Bengali women also meant that in the seventies a section of the population was not exposed to politics beyond the immediate struggle.

The battle-ground was different too. Everyone could unite in rent strikes against private landlords and the campaign for more state-funded housing; but a fight for housing such as that which took place in the seventies, when there is simply not enough to go round, can easily degenerate into a scramble for the housing that is already available; and the fighters can easily be divided into different camps. A huge source of potential division, especially between Bengalis and more long-established East Enders, was council house allocation. While Bengalis complained that they were not being given the same treatment as everyone else, there were many others who argued that those who had been established in the area longer should be given preference. And all squatters were often resented by tenants, who saw them as getting for free what tenants had to pay for and as attempting to jump the housing waiting-list queue. The situation could be exploited by the far Right, and the antagonisms must have been welcomed by many housing officers as distracting anger from the underlying failure of the system.

The fight against racism in the seventies was also very different from the fight against fascism in the thirties, as Piratin pointed out when his book was reissued in 1978. Mosley's British Union of Fascists had been part of a 'world wide reactionary development'⁷³ that had to be fought at home and abroad. The National Front, and later the BNP, have been able to inspire a section of alienated youth with a creed of racist thuggery that has more than once led to murder, and to play the race card to win a level of electoral support. But neither of these parties have been felt as a threat beyond the groups they have targeted, and they have never been part of a significant political movement that has inspired a major dedicated response.

Importantly, too, anyone attempting to organise from the Marxist Left in the seventies, had first to contend with an intensified cold-war rhetoric that equated their politics in people's minds with that of the now reviled Soviet Union. At the same time, the long post-war boom had enabled the reformist Left to develop the welfare state, from which they could argue that a more revolutionary Socialism was un-necessary.

This then was the objective situation that any political organiser had to build on; yet there was no shortage of political groups, besides BHAG, willing to try - in fact so many that it could be difficult for those not involved to distinguish between the different Left organisations, which could thus be blamed for each other's failings. Various Left organisations played a part in

⁷² See *Tenants Tackle Racism: An account of a series of experimental workshops held in Stepney – 1984/5* (Dame Colet House etc, 1986)

⁷³ Piratin *op cit* p xi

combating racism,⁷⁴ but, although they drew parallels with the 'Battle of Cable Street', they did not manage to combine this fight with significant grass-roots action in other areas, as the Communists had done, and they failed to create any lasting base within the Bengali community. The Anti-Nazi League, run by the Socialist Workers' Party, was appreciated for its organisation, but they were generally regarded as outsiders who only turned up for the Sunday stand-off with the National Front, and had their own 'ulterior motive'.⁷⁵ They had failed to persuade people that the Left's own agenda was really an agenda that could unite different sections of the working class in their common interest. East London Workers Against Racism, ELWAR, which was organised by the Revolutionary Communist Party, did take an active role in the housing battle. They wanted to deny the racists any victories and fought to enable Bengali families to stay on white estates where they had been allocated flats. They protected the flats and canvassed the white tenants for their support, organising protection from within the estate. However ELWAR was a small organisation, and such tactics could only work on a larger scale and - most importantly - with the support of the community who had to form the front line troops. The majority of people within that community chose instead to fight for the right to stay in Spitalfields.

How much BHAG's demands for independent black action influenced the development of Bengali politics is impossible to say. Certainly they contradicted all the Left activists' arguments about working-class unity, limited the scope of the housing movement, and did not support the sort of coming together of different groups in a common cause that occurred in the thirties rent strikes. And the separatist stance encouraged those who got involved to ignore other movements and views and not to ask what they might learn from history and from those who remembered earlier struggles.⁷⁶ This separateness was perpetuated through its promotion of a ghettoised community and ethnically distinct electoral wards.

The trajectory taken by Bengali organisation in the East End of London provides empirical evidence of the general pattern described by Kalbir Shukra in her history of 'black politics'. She blames the adoption of autonomous struggle for turning the New Left's different 'new social movements' inwards and creating rivalries between oppressed groups as they abandoned visions of radical change to claim their piece of the British pie.⁷⁷ In 1978, Stuart Hall and his co-authors wrote that autonomous struggle had 'become the most powerful political tendency within active black groups in Britain', and that the argument for it had been 'theoretically developed' in *Race Today*.⁷⁸ But the theory of black radicalism was never fully developed anywhere. The gaps in logic were not confronted, and the problem of how to cross from sectional struggle to the agreed final step of struggle as a class uniting all the oppressed was

⁷⁴ Some stood in the 1978 borough council elections, see J. Eade, *The politics of Community: The Bangladeshi Community in East London* (Aldershot 1989) 56 - 59

⁷⁵ See S. Glynn, *The Home and the World: Bengali political mobilisation in London's East End, and a comparison with the Jewish past* (London University PhD 2003) 188. The president of the Federation of Bangladesh Organisations publicly 'urged all Asians to join the Anti Nazi League' (see Stepney Trades council *op cit* 95) but this does not seem to reflect uncritical confidence in the organisation among those on the ground.

⁷⁶ There was an article by Joe Jacobs on the police and the fascists in the thirties in the last issue of *Race Today* before Darcus Howe's editorship, but it does not engage with wider issues or the current situation.

⁷⁷ K. Shukra, *The Changing Pattern of Black Politics in Britain* (London 1998)

⁷⁸ S. Hall, C. Critcher, T. Jefferson, J. Clarke and B. Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (Basingstoke 1978) 370

never addressed - perhaps because this gap was uncrossable. Since the theory was not developed, it could not really be passed on beyond the basic mantra of autonomous organisation: the excuse that grass-roots work left little time for political discussion is not enough because it can always be made. The passion and anger of the movements' leaders made sure their message was heard, but not that it was fully understood. The passion and anger of the rebels was not directed into structured radical politics. Ideas of community organisation were readily taken up by a new generation of activists, but also by the state and the political establishment, who were ready to co-opt them into the existing system. The New Left, of which BHAG was a central part, had criticised its Marxist parent to the point of disowning it, but the ideas that were adopted in its place could easily be manipulated to present a progressive image that served only to obscure underlying inequalities. The tendency for separate self-organisation appears to have led the Bengalis down a political byway: there was no new and 'progressive' way out, as BHAG had envisaged, just escape into the new multicultural mainstream.

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