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ANTI-FASCISM IN BRITAIN

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ANTI-FASCISM IN BRITAIN

Anti-fascism has long been one of the most active and dynamic areas of radical protest and direct action. Yet it is an area of struggle and popular resistance that remains largely unexplored by historians, sociologists and political scientists.

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The book traces the ideological, tactical and organisational evolution of anti-fascist groups and explores their often complicated relationships with the mainstream and radical left, as well as assessing their effectiveness in combating the extreme right.

Nigel Copley is Professor of Modern History at Teesside University, UK and co-director of the Centre for Fascist, Anti-Fascist and Post-Fascist Studies.

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Second edition

Nigel Copsey

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For my father, Bill Copsey

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ABBREVIATIONS

AFA	Anti-Fascist Action
AFCs	anti-fascist committees
AFL	Anti-Fascist League
AFN	Anti-Fascist Network
AGM	Annual General Meeting
AJEX	Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen
ALCARAF	All Lewisham Campaign Against Racism and Fascism
ANL	Anti-Nazi League
ARA	Anti-Racist Alliance
ARAFCC	All London Anti-Racist Anti-Fascist Co-ordinating Committee
AUT	Association of University Teachers
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BDP	British Democratic Party
BF	British Fascisti, British Fascists
BM	British Movement
BNP	British National Party
BoD	Board of Deputies of British Jews
BUF	British Union of Fascists (and National Socialists)
<i>CARF</i>	Campaign Against Racism and Fascism
CARM	Campaign Against Racism in the Media
CLP	constituency Labour Party
Comintern	Communist International
CPA	Communist Party Archives
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
CST	Community Security Trust
CWU	Communication Workers' Union
EDL	English Defence League

xii Abbreviations

EEC	European Economic Community
FBU	Fire Brigades' Union
GLA	Greater London Assembly
GLC	Greater London Council
HnH	HOPE not Hate
ILD	International Labour Defence
ILP	Independent Labour Party
IMG	International Marxist Group
IS	International Socialists
ITV	Independent Television
IWA	Indian Workers' Association
IWCA	Independent Working Class Association
JACOB	Jewish Aid Committee of Britain
JC	<i>Jewish Chronicle</i>
JDC	Jewish Defence Committee
JPC	Jewish People's Council Against Fascism and Anti-Semitism
JRRT	Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust
JSG	Jewish Socialists' Group
LAC	London Area Council of the Board of Deputies
LFOS	Labour Friends of Searchlight
LMHR	Love Music Hate Racism
LSA	London Socialist Alliance
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
MP	Member of Parliament
MUJEX	Manchester Union of Jewish Ex-Servicemen
NAAR	National Assembly Against Racism
NAFL	National Anti-Fascist League
NATFHE	National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education
NCCL	National Council for Civil Liberties
NF	National Front
NMP	Newham Monitoring Project
NorSCARF	North Staffordshire Campaign Against Racism and Fascism
NSDAP	Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (National Socialist German Workers' Party, or Nazi Party)
NSM	National Socialist Movement
NUCF	National Union for Combating Fascism
NUJ	National Union of Journalists
NUPA	New Party youth movement
NUS	National Union of Students
NUWM	National Unemployed Workers' Movement
NWF	New World Fellowship
OMS	Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies
PDF	People's Defence Force
PNL	Polytechnic of North London

POA	Public Order Act
RA	Red Action
RAR	Rock Against Racism
RCP	Revolutionary Communist Party
SWP	Socialist Workers' Party
TAC	Trades Advisory Council
TGWU	Transport and General Workers' Union
TNA	The National Archives
TUC	Trades Union Congress
TWAF	Tyne and Wear Anti-Fascist Association
UAF	Unite Against Fascism
UCAR	United Campaign Against Racism
UKIP	UK Independence Party
WRP	Workers' Revolutionary Party
YCL	Young Communist League
YSM	Yellow Star Movement

INTRODUCTION

This book is the second revised edition of *Anti-Fascism in Britain*, the original edition having been published over 15 years ago.¹ *Anti-Fascism in Britain* was the first book to chart the broad history of British anti-fascism as a continuous phenomenon from the 1920s to the present day. What struck me, at this time, was that a voluminous body of scholarly literature existed on the protagonists of British fascism, yet very little attention had been directed towards its antagonists. It was in response to this unfortunate imbalance that *Anti-Fascism in Britain* was first conceived.

This second edition offers a welcome opportunity to reprise this history, to present an even fuller picture, and to bring the chronology up to date. All the earlier chapters have been revised for this new edition, and a sixth chapter has been added that captures opposition to the electoral emergence of the British National Party after the turn of millennium. The intention with the first volume was to provide an accessible and critical analysis of the *longue durée* of British anti-fascism. This second edition is approached in the same spirit.

The book is unapologetically detailed, and offers its readers a comprehensive full-length account. All the same, it remains incomplete. Even allowing for in-depth study, it has not been possible to cover every activist group, nor has it been possible to discuss anti-fascism with regard to some distinct types (for example, anti-fascism as experienced by feminists, pacifists, literary writers or anti-fascist exiles).² In view of that, this is not a study of anti-fascism in Britain in its *totality*. Nonetheless, it does engage with its complex trajectory at length, and it does so applying a broad and multifaceted approach.

Our starting point is the 1920s. The account opens in 1923, over a decade before the most celebrated episode of popular anti-fascism in British political history – the ‘Battle of Cable Street’. From beginnings with which many will be unfamiliar, this book then charts the course of anti-fascism throughout the twentieth century and concludes in the second decade of this century. The first two chapters have a

pre-1945 agenda and relate the origins and development of anti-fascism from the initial responses to the precursors of Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists, through the early origins of opposition to Mosley's Blackshirts, before proceeding to Cable Street and beyond. The third chapter starts with attempts to prevent the resurrection of home-grown fascism in the period from 1945 to 1950 before moving on to explore under-researched responses to a renewal of fascist activity in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In the fourth chapter, opposition to the National Front between 1967 and 1979 is investigated. It was in the 1970s when the Anti-Nazi League emerged, which for many, decades on, still offers *the* model for how best to organise against fascism. In the fifth chapter we move on to examine the forms that the continuing fight against fascism took in the 1980s and 1990s. Finally, the sixth chapter extends the chronological scope into the present day and focuses specifically on how anti-fascists responded to the challenge presented by the British National Party, the most electorally successful far-right party in British political history.

Although the historical literature on Britain's anti-fascists has certainly grown appreciably since the publication of this book's original edition, the rate of growth still lags behind scholarly study of Britain's fascists. Nonetheless, we do know far more today about anti-fascism than ever before. During the past 15 years or so, the field of 'anti-fascist studies' has expanded with important scholarly contributions from Keith Hodgson (2010) and Daniel Tilles (2015), which examined anti-fascism in terms of left-wing and Jewish responses, respectively.³ *Varieties of Anti-Fascism*, a volume that I co-edited with Andrzej Olechnowicz, published in 2010, considered the multifaceted nature of the British anti-fascist experience in the inter-war period.⁴ Those seeking an informative discussion of historians and the study of anti-fascism in Britain should turn to the chapter in that volume by Andrzej Olechnowicz.⁵ Then there is the continuing literature published by past and present anti-fascist activists, including: David Renton's engaging study of the original Anti-Nazi League (2006); Dave Hann and Steve Tilzey's lively account of Anti-Fascist Action (2003), now displaced by Sean Birchall's 'official' history (2010); and longer-term studies of physical force anti-fascism by Dave Hann (2013) and M. Testa (2015).⁶ Further incremental additions to the field have come through activist accounts, journal articles and book chapters.⁷

The function of the historian is not merely to fill gaps in existing literature. There must be a rationale for why anti-fascism is historically important. On this point it is the scale of popular participation in anti-fascist activity that first and foremost makes anti-fascism historically significant. In cumulative terms, from the 1920s to the present day, the figure extends to hundreds of thousands of people. It is an undeniable fact that anti-fascism has impacted on many ordinary lives and this alone makes anti-fascism worth considering in its own right. To reinforce this point, we should never lose sight of the fact that in relative terms, far more people supported the anti-fascist cause than ever supported fascist organisations. The membership of Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists, the largest fascist organisation in Britain, peaked at fewer than 50,000 in 1934; that same year, possibly between 100,000 and 150,000 people attended a rally against Mosley in London's

Hyde Park (newspaper estimates were that Mosley's contingent was outnumbered by around 20:1). In more recent times, where the membership of the National Front reached 17,500 at the very most, the Anti-Nazi League, formed to oppose the Front in 1977, could boast support in excess of 40,000 members within the first year of its existence. The British National Party's membership supposedly peaked at over 14,000 in May 2010; in that year one anti-fascist campaign group claimed a supporter base of over 200,000.⁸

Numerical significance aside, a further aspect to anti-fascism's historical importance is the part it has played in the failure of British fascism. Naturally anti-fascist groups are keen to stress their decisive role, and usually to the exclusion of all other factors. Thus we are faced with (self-congratulatory) statements from anti-fascist groups such as '[m]ass mobilisations like Cable Street stopped Mosley' and the presence of the Anti-Nazi League on the streets 'meant it proved impossible to turn out Front members. Recruitment slumped and their vote collapsed'.⁹ However, even if anti-fascist activists overstate their case, accounts from disinterested historians do usually accord anti-fascism a place in their multi-causal explanations of why British fascism failed. For instance, in his study of Mosley's fascism, D.S. Lewis identified three groups of reasons that prevented its success, one of which was anti-fascist opposition.¹⁰ As for the decline of the National Front, Richard Thurlow believed that this 'was partially due to the successful undermining of it by the Anti-Nazi League'.¹¹ It has to be said, however, that some historians divest anti-fascist opposition of any telling impact on its adversary. Roger Griffin has taken a dim view of anti-fascism's significance, arguing that revolutionary ideology only appeals to a small minority in modern pluralistic societies and so '[w]hat marginalizes fascism, then, is the irreducible pluralism of modern society, and not the strength of liberalism as such, let alone the concerted opposition of anti-fascists'.¹²

From our extended perspective we find ourselves in a position to re-examine how far anti-fascism was of consequence in the political marginalisation of British fascism, though this does not mean to say that fascism will occupy the centre of attention. Throughout, anti-fascism retains the focus and, accordingly, the scope, strategy, organisation and operation of anti-fascism form the other major concerns of this book. It is through these concerns that linear traditions of anti-fascism emerge and, as we shall see, the overarching feature in this regard has been the historic divide between radical or militant anti-fascism with its emphasis on physical confrontation, and 'legal' forms of anti-fascism – a tactical division that has consistently influenced relations not only between but also within those forces actively engaged in opposing British fascism.

What exactly is anti-fascism? Though admittedly not as problematic to define as fascism, we must nevertheless proceed with caution. There is a stumbling block, and this relates to how far the term 'anti-fascism' should stretch. If we take anti-fascism to mean simply opposition to fascism, then should it include responses by the state, by the media, or even responses by those on the conservative non-fascist right? In his book on fascism, anti-fascism and Britain in the 1940s, which was published alongside the original edition of this volume, David Renton opted to restrict

usage of the term ‘anti-fascist’ to ‘activists, people who objected to the rise of fascism, who hated the doctrines of fascism and did something to stop their growth’.¹³ Renton put the emphasis on activism and what followed from this is his additional defining feature – organisation – where ‘[a]lmost every anti-fascist shared the belief that fascism could not be beaten by individuals, but only by an anti-fascist group or campaign.’¹⁴ It is thus activism and organisation that separate anti-fascists from ‘non-fascists’. The latter term he reserved for those who may have found fascist ideas ‘objectionable’ but who did nothing actively to stop fascism.

The approach adopted in the following study departs from Renton. Here, anti-fascism is defined as a thought, an attitude or feeling of hostility towards fascist ideology and its propagators which may or may not be acted upon. Anti-fascism can assume myriad forms, and its sources vary. In the preface to *Varieties of Anti-Fascism*, I wrote:

Of course, on one level, anti-fascism demands very little when it comes to its definition. At its most straightforward anti-fascism may simply be defined as opposition to fascism as an ideology and to the propagators of that ideology (whether a political party, group, movement, individual, or government).¹⁵

So is there a true anti-fascism? My thoughts are that

we cannot delimit ‘true’ anti-fascism according to academic definitions of who the anti-fascism is directed at. The voice of historical actors is critical here. The definition of fascism must rest solely with the anti-fascist, regardless of whether or not they assess/define fascism correctly [...] opposition refers not only to the act of opposing (the hostile action) but also to the state of being in opposition (the hostile attitude). As a result, anti-fascism can take both active and passive forms.¹⁶

For sure, anti-fascism is not the sole preserve of the left, whether Marxist or non-Marxist. Put simply, people oppose fascism for a variety of reasons, whether political or humanitarian. What all anti-fascists have in common is an anti-fascist ‘minimum’ – a shared belief that fascism is antithetical to Enlightenment concepts of humanity and society.¹⁷ Regardless of their ideological orientation, be it communist, social-democratic, liberal or conservative, all anti-fascists oppose fascism on the basis that fascism is a negation of human dignity and natural rights. Although this gives us a harder furrow to plough, our approach to anti-fascism is more flexible and far-reaching. In the end, this leaves us with an impression of anti-fascism as a veritable mosaic, a truly variegated phenomenon that when pieced together offers a richly textured picture of a relatively neglected and yet important part of modern British history.

Notes

- 1 N. Copey, *Anti-Fascism in Britain*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000.
- 2 For more on these different anti-fascisms, see N. Copey and A. Olechnowicz (eds), *Varieties of Anti-Fascism: Britain in the Inter-War Period*, Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2010.

- 3 K. Hodgson, *Fighting Fascism: The British Left and the Rise of Fascism, 1919–39*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010; D. Tilles, *British Fascist Antisemitism and Jewish Responses, 1932–40*, London: Bloomsbury, 2015.
- 4 Copey and Olechnowicz (eds), *Varieties of Anti-Fascism*.
- 5 See A. Olechnowicz, 'Introduction: Historians and the Study of Anti-Fascism in Britain', in Copey and Olechnowicz (eds), *Varieties of Anti-Fascism*, pp. 1–27.
- 6 See D. Renton, *When We Touched the Sky: The Anti-Nazi League, 1977–1981*, Cheltenham: New Clarion Press, 2006; D. Hann and S. Tilzey, *No Retreat: The Secret War Between Britain's Anti-Fascists and the Far Right*, Lytham: Milo Books, 2003; S. Birchall, *Beating the Fascists: The Untold Story of Anti-Fascist Action*, London: Freedom Press, 2010; D. Hann, *Physical Resistance: Or, A Hundred Years of Anti-Fascism*, Winchester: Zero Books, 2013; and M. Testa, *Militant Anti-Fascism: A Hundred Years of Resistance*, Edinburgh: A.K. Press, 2015.
- 7 See for example (the following list is not exhaustive): K. Bullstreet, *Bash the Fasc: Anti-Fascist Recollections, 1984–93*, London: Kate Sharpley Library, 2001; M. Lux, *Anti-Fascist*, London: Phoenix Press, 2006; N. Lowles (ed.), *From Cable Street to Oldham: Seventy Years of Community Resistance*, London: Searchlight, 2007; T. Greenstein, *The Fight Against Fascism in Brighton and the South Coast*, Brighton: Brighton History Workshop, Pamphlet no. 1, 2011; N. Lowles, *HOPE: The Story of the Campaign that Helped Defeat the BNP*, London: HOPE not Hate, 2014; N. Copey and D. Tilles, 'Uniting a Divided Community? Re-appraising Jewish Responses to British Fascist Antisemitism, 1932–39', *Holocaust Studies*, Special Issue: Fascism and the Jews: Italy and Britain, 2009, vol. 15, 163–87, and reprinted as a chapter in D. Tilles and S. Garau (eds), *Fascism and the Jews: Italy and Britain*, London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2011, pp. 180–206; N. Copey, 'Communists and the Inter-War Struggle in the United States and Britain', *Labour History Review*, 2011, vol. 76, no. 3, 184–206; chapters by Thurlow, Macklin, Gottlieb, Mates, Renton and Copey in N. Copey and D. Renton (eds), *British Fascism, the Labour Movement and the State*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005; N. Copey, 'From Direct Action to Community Action: The Changing Dynamics of Anti-fascist Opposition', in N. Copey and G. Macklin (eds), *British National Party: Contemporary Perspectives*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2011, pp. 123–41; M. Hayes, 'Red Action: Left-wing Pariah', in E. Smith and M. Worley (eds), *Against the Grain: The British Far Left from 1956*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014, pp. 229–46; and D. Renton, 'Anti-fascism in Britain, 1997–2012', in Smith and Worley (eds), *Against the Grain*, pp. 247–63.
- 8 The figure of 200,000 plus is given in civilsocietycommission.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Hope-not-Hate-evidence.pdf (last viewed 8 March 2016).
- 9 C. Bambery, *Killing the Nazi Menace*, London: Socialist Workers' Party, 1992, p. 29 and p. 34.
- 10 See D.S. Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur: Mosley, Fascism and British Society, 1931–81*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987, esp. ch. 5.
- 11 R. Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, 2nd rev. edn, London: I.B. Tauris, 1998, p. 256.
- 12 R. Griffin, 'British Fascism: The Ugly Duckling', in M. Cronin (ed.), *The Failure of British Fascism*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996, p. 162.
- 13 D. Renton, *Fascism, Anti-Fascism and Britain in the 1940s*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000, p. 71.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 72.
- 15 N. Copey, 'Preface: Towards a New Anti-Fascist "Minimum"', in Copey and Olechnowicz (eds) *Varieties of Anti-Fascism*, p. xiv.
- 16 *Ibid.*, pp. xiv–xv.
- 17 For further discussion of my anti-fascist minimum and the relationship between anti-fascism and ideology, see *ibid.*, pp. xviii.

1

THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF ANTI-FASCISM 1923–35

I

The roots of Britain's anti-fascist tradition can be traced back to 7 October 1923, when Communists disrupted the inaugural meeting of the British Fascisti (BF). This rally of Britain's first fascist organisation, attended by some 500 people, ended in 'pandemonium'. Two further meetings, both held in November 1923 in London's Hammersmith, were also disrupted.¹ The very birth of British fascism had encountered opposition – this before the hostility that was directed towards Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists (BUF) in the 1930s. Until recently, antagonism towards the BUF's precursors had passed historians by,² given that Britain's early fascist organisations had been written off as 'irrelevancies', unimportant in both ideological and organisational terms. Even though there were no mass anti-fascist mobilisations on the scale of those that would take place in the 1930s, the antecedents of this later mass opposition originate in the previous decade.

The formation of the British Fascisti in May 1923 (acknowledged by the *Daily Herald* on 30 August 1923) gave rise to some concern that British fascists might reproduce the violence of their Italian counterparts. Italian Fascism had started out as a tiny movement in 1919 (the BF had just 15 adherents at the time of the *Herald's* report), but had grown exponentially in a short space of time, facilitated by the anti-communism of the Italian political establishment. By early 1924 the BF had expanded to some 2,000 members (many of whom had dual membership with the Conservative Party). By the time the BF held a national rally in Trafalgar Square in late 1924, it could muster 1,800 activists in central London, with the security services guesstimating a total strength of around 30,000³ (helped no doubt by the absence of any membership or mandatory subscription fee). Threateningly, the BF's 'enrolment oath' carried the open-ended pledge 'to render every service in my power to the British Fascisti in their struggle against all treacherous and revolutionary movements

2 Origins and development of anti-fascism 1923–35

now working for the destruction of the Throne and the Empire'.⁴ For those left-wing militants disrupting the earliest meetings of the BF, the founding of an Italian-style fascist organisation (the imitative name 'Fascisti' making the link with Mussolini's movement explicit) had to be resisted, for a more mature form of *fascismo* might be turned loose on British workers if left unchecked.

However, since mainstream opinion paid modest attention to Italian Fascism, the founding of a domestic equivalent was largely ignored. Italy was a minor 'Mediterranean land' after all, and Fascism came across as specifically and stereotypically Italian ('theatrical' and 'dramatic'). Although inclined towards lawless brutality, a point made repeatedly by the Rome correspondent of the *Daily Herald* and by Guglielmo Salvadori in the *New Statesman*, Fascism was praised for saving Italy from the anarchy of the left. Conservative opinion applauded Mussolini for restoring 'order' and this evaluation was even echoed in the Labour press, which had acclaimed Italian Fascism for a 'bloodless revolution'. Despite Italian Fascism's venomous assault on the left, Labour declared that 'we must welcome Fascism half-way' and concluded that left-wing militancy had brought about Italian Fascism by engendering disorder and political confusion.⁵ Labour was keen to stress democratic, legalistic credentials and was anxious to dissociate itself from the 'irresponsible' revolutionary agitation of 'continental' socialism. The effect was that initial opposition to the first growths of domestic fascism did not attract widespread interest or enthusiasm.

Nonetheless, left-wing militants alive to a potential fascist threat in Britain quickly saw the need for specific anti-fascist organisations (possibly a response to the Fascisti gaining the upper hand in initial confrontations).⁶ One early anti-fascist initiative came in January 1924 when a defensive 'anti-fascisti' organisation known as the People's Defence Force (PDF) was launched. From the 1917 Club in Soho, London, the PDF issued a statement on 26 January 1924. This maintained that the 'existence of a militant body calling itself the British Fascisti obviously inspired by the example of the Italian reactionaries [...] calls for a corresponding force pledged to resist any interference with the due operation of the constitution'. The PDF cast itself as a non-aggressive, legalistic organisation and even commended the police as a model to all its members. Declaring itself formally independent but aligned to the 'workers' movement', it pledged to 'keep a watchful eye on the activities of the Fascisti' and 'resist any attempt to break up meetings'.⁷ Special Branch reported that it was not known whether this defence group was officially connected with the Communist movement although key personnel appeared to be closely linked. One of the organisers, H. Martin, was Secretary of the London District Council of the National Unemployed Workers' Committee.⁸ Another, H. Johnstone, was identified as the probable organiser of the West London branch of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB).⁹

Alongside the PDF, a second anti-fascist organisation emerged, known as the National Union for Combating Fascismo (NUCF).¹⁰ This was based not in London but, curiously, in a bleak Yorkshire village near Hebden Bridge. Formed by poet and writer Ethel Carnie Holdsworth and her spouse Alfred, the NUCF published an anti-fascist newspaper, *The Clear Light*, which claimed a circulation of

5,000.¹¹ The NUCF saw itself as a ‘specialized branch of the Socialist Movement’ but declared no intention of building a numerically large counter-movement. Its policy was ‘not to present an organised opposition to the holding of B.F. meetings’.¹² Although ‘revolutionary socialist’, it was non-violent: ‘The advocacy of violence is reactionary. It plays into the hands of the enemy. It diverts the masses from the very weapon they are historically fitted to wield – their industrial organisations.’¹³ The NUCF recognised that the ‘B.F. are as much entitled as anyone else to air their views in public, and as much entitled to a fair and generous hearing’. Rather than break up fascist meetings, the purpose of the NUCF was ‘to watch the activities of the B.F. and similar organisations in their own Districts, and to report periodically to H.Q. In other words, the N.U.C.F. will become Labour’s C.I.D. [Criminal Investigations Department]’.¹⁴ The NUCF circularised all divisional and borough Labour parties in the country to warn of the fascist threat. The problem was that their intelligence relied on what the BF itself claimed, including a grossly inflated membership claim of 250,000 in 1925. It also rounded on Labour papers for making ‘only jokes about Mussolini and the beginning of the Fascist movement in this country. But it is pantomime which, if the Fascist Movement be not broken, will turn into dark comedy as far as Labour is concerned’.¹⁵ There is a tale of BF members, posing as Communists from Manchester, making threats against the editor of *The Clear Light* and the newspaper’s printer in 1925.¹⁶ However, it is doubtful that the organisation’s existence seriously troubled the BF’s London HQ. Although some NUCF branches were established outside Yorkshire, in Manchester and Burnley for example, and there was a corresponding address listed for the organising secretary (E. Burton Dancy) in Chiswick, in West London, and also a Scottish organiser in Edinburgh, it remained a largely local and provincial affair and soon folded.

Even allowing for the initiation of these two early anti-fascist organisations, and minor confrontations between left-wing militants and British fascists during 1923–4, majority opinion on the left was not unduly concerned by British fascism. The British Fascisti, formed by Rotha Lintorn-Orman, 28-year-old granddaughter of Field Marshall Sir Lintorn Simmons, was more an object of ridicule than dread. The BF was generally regarded as a something of a joke: an adult extension of the Scout movement rather than a well-oiled repressive machine; an eccentric and amateurish pressure group whose public activities were largely innocuous. That the British Fascisti displayed a badge with the initials ‘B.F.’ – ‘Bloody Fools’ – only added to this impression. Even on the far left this caricature of British fascism was widely received. The Marxist ‘Plebs League’ dismissed the BF as ‘a glorified Boys’ Brigade’ and proceeded to ridicule it as a ‘laughingstock’, an unsophisticated caricature of the Italian fascist movement.¹⁷ Rather than devote itself systematically to Italian-style anti-communist violence, the British Fascisti appeared more concerned about the party’s name (subsequently changed to the English-sounding ‘British Fascists’ in 1924 – presumably to offset negative associations with Italian Fascism). During the 1924 election there were reports of the British Fascists even offering to steward Labour Party meetings. The offer was rebuffed.¹⁸

4 Origins and development of anti-fascism 1923–35

On the other hand there were hardliners in the organisation, like future Lord Haw-Haw, William Joyce (the BF's Chelsea District Officer), who were more combative and organised themselves into a physical force section intent on heckling and breaking up Communist Party meetings.¹⁹ There were also reports of raids on the Glasgow office of the *Sunday Worker* in 1925 in which local fascists were implicated. For those few on the militant left who had taken the threat of fascism seriously, the kidnapping of Harry Pollitt, a leading figure in the Communist Party, by a group of British Fascists in March 1925 finally brought some vindication. Where previously, concerns about domestic fascism had been restricted to a minority of activists, the kidnapping of Pollitt from a train at Edgehill, Liverpool, prompted the highest echelons of the CPGB to focus attention on the possible dangers of fascist provocation in Britain. Disturbed by incipient fascist activity, the Political Bureau of the CPGB urged the Labour Party and Trades Union Congress (TUC) to launch an enquiry into the strength of the fascist movement and suggest possible anti-fascist counter-measures. Yet these warnings were met with derision from within the mainstream left, which judged the Communist Party unnecessarily alarmist. The Labour Party interpreted the kidnapping of Pollitt as nothing more sinister than a publicity-seeking stunt. All the more so because BF activities ordinarily revolved around political meetings and relatively innocuous social and leisure pursuits, such as dances, dinners and whist drives.

The four fascists charged with kidnapping Pollitt were acquitted following (spurious) claims that they merely wanted to take Pollitt away for a weekend in North Wales, but where as this acquittal met with Labour Party silence, the CPGB continued to sound the alarm. In July 1925 the CPGB's leading theoretician, Rajani Palme Dutt, called for urgent preparations against fascism. He stressed that the prevailing tendency to 'laugh at the Fascists in this country' was 'stupid'. British fascism was not an 'isolated freak phenomenon', according to Palme Dutt, but part of a wider and deeper social movement rooted in the petty bourgeoisie and unorganised proletariat. Ominously, for Palme Dutt, fascism was developing in two directions: 'guerrilla escapades' against the left (i.e. the Pollitt incident) and 'strike-breaking' preparations. He predicted that this development would continue, warning that given its potential support base, fascism constituted a significant threat to the entire labour movement. Moreover, for Palme Dutt, the Pollitt case confirmed the close connection between the state and fascism, and it was now clear that the working class could not put its trust in the state for protection. Rather than rely on 'bourgeois legality', Palme Dutt called on the working class to organise against the fascist danger. He suggested 'publicity and exposure of fascist movements and plans of the enemy; and secondly, local defence organisations of the workers to prevent disturbance'.²⁰

Palme Dutt's warning was given further prescience when, shortly afterwards, the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies (OMS) was established. The OMS, launched towards the end of September 1925, was ostensibly a 'non-political' organisation sponsored by the Government to ensure the delivery of essential supplies in the event of a general strike. Yet the CPGB interpreted it as 'the most definite

step towards organised Fascism yet made in this country'.²¹ The Communist Party accused the OMS of being violently anti-working class, a 'strike-breaking' organisation with direct links to the Government. Hence it was denounced as a 'fascist-type' operation. However, this view of the OMS was not widely shared. Despite a belief that 'fascists' were 'more or less associated with Conservative politics', the official Labour leadership passively accepted the OMS.²² Faith was retained in official assurances that the OMS was neither 'political' nor 'aggressive' and that it had no connection to the British Fascists. Labour leaders were further reassured when the Government refused the offer made by the British Fascists to assist the OMS.²³ In any case, soon afterwards the BF split. Many conservative 'loyalists' left the movement whilst the residue, having failed to become an approved ally of the state, rapidly disappeared into obscurity.²⁴

With the Labour Party and TUC rejecting the Communist Party's analysis of the fascist danger inherent in the OMS, the CPGB acted unilaterally and created an anti-fascist 'Workers' Defence Corps', activated during the General Strike in May 1926.²⁵ Then following the General Strike, there were calls for the revival of a workers' defence organisation, a move encouraged by the Executive Committee of the Communist International (Comintern), which had met in Moscow between November and December 1926. This directed the CPGB to work towards 'the preparation of the workers to repel a new development of Fascism'.²⁶ Efforts were made thereafter to revive the Defence Corps which now became known as the 'Labour League of Ex-Servicemen'. It was envisaged that a key function of this organisation would be defensive response to fascist provocation.²⁷ According to Home Office files, however, the Labour League of Ex-Servicemen remained a skeleton organisation. Despite boasts of over 100 sections across the country, it was never numerically significant. In December 1927 Home Office sources claimed that the League's total membership in London was only 300, with a mere third described as active members.²⁸

Although set up during the General Strike to defend workers from the OMS and the British Fascists, the Workers' Defence Corps had also pledged to defend workers from other 'fascist' organisations, such as the 'National Fascisti'. An offshoot from the BF, the National Fascisti was formed in 1924 when it was estimated to have had just 60 members (the President and second-in-command were Jews). Inclined more towards street activism, the offshoot being more radical and violent than its parent organisation, the National Fascisti was vehemently anti-communist:

Communism and Bolshevism is the creed of wild beasts [...] Wild beasts cannot be met with bare hands or gloves, they require more forceful and stronger weapons. So to work Fascisti, let us band together and pitch this hell's spawn into the sea, and Britain will be all the sweeter and cleaner by their removal.²⁹

The result was sporadic disturbances and crude, ad hoc anti-fascist retaliation: a National Fascisti meeting in Hyde Park in February 1926 was interrupted by a

crowd of 60–70 left-wing militants; a National Fascisti meeting held at Marble Arch in November 1926 was sabotaged by Communists who rushed the platform; and in January 1927, following attempts by National Fascisti activists to disrupt a meeting in Trafalgar Square, where 1,500 people had gathered to protest against a refusal to grant an amnesty to those imprisoned during the General Strike, some 150–200 Communists were reported to have chased after a group of Fascisti in retaliation. Communists had taken offence at the Fascisti demonstrating from the tops of passing buses and in order to avoid a fracas, police arrested the organiser of the Paddington branch of the CPGB.³⁰

Low-key disorder was the usual response to National Fascisti provocation. One notable exception to this was reaction to the hijacking of a *Daily Herald* delivery van at gunpoint by four National Fascisti activists in October 1925. This episode momentarily widened interest in British fascism and gave rise to broader opposition. Following an exposé of the National Fascisti in the *Daily Herald*, a van containing some 8,000 copies of the pro-Labour newspaper was hijacked en route to London's Euston Station and then 'driven furiously' until it crashed into the railings of a church, whereupon it was deserted.³¹ The National Fascisti claimed that it wanted to draw attention to the *Daily Herald's* 'subversive nature' and delay circulation. The fact that the hijackers were merely charged with a breach of the peace and not larceny was met with consternation on the left, taken as clear evidence of the Government's 'class' prejudice. The *Daily Herald* received hundreds of supporting letters calling for a firmer anti-fascist line by the Government. Labour (and Liberal) MPs subsequently pressed Tory Home Secretary Joynson-Hicks for an explanation, the Independent Labour Party (ILP) held a series of protest meetings, and the Secretary of the TUC, Walter Citrine, sent a letter of protest to Joynson-Hicks, which spoke of a 'disquieting feeling' arising within the trade unions that the authorities were not dealing firmly enough with fascists.³²

Since fascist provocation had hitherto been carried out solely against Communists, the Labour Party had remained silent. Following the *Daily Herald* incident, concerns over domestic fascism mounted within mainstream Labour Party circles, but this development should not be overstated. More noticeable was the way that mainstream left (and Liberal) opinion appeared disturbed primarily by Conservative political prejudices interfering with the impartial administration of justice, especially since the *Daily Herald* case followed on from the acquittal of the fascists involved in the kidnapping of Pollitt. As far as the official Labour leadership was concerned, judicial leniency towards fascism was far more significant than these provocative displays which, after all, hardly invited comparison with Italian Fascism.

By the late 1920s British fascism was floundering. The British Fascists and the National Fascisti were no longer capable of sustaining opposition. The National Fascisti quickly disappeared from public view following a damaging internal rift in March 1927 over alleged misappropriation of funds; the British Fascists also effectively collapsed by the late 1920s. Home Office figures suggest that the BF's following had fallen to a mere 300–400 members.³³ Robert Benewick has argued that the 'influence of the British Fascists and the National Fascisti on public order, policy

and opinion, was negligible [...] The political forces on neither the right nor the left took them seriously'.³⁴ Benewick's standard conclusion does carry validity: the mainstream right generally viewed fascism as an eccentric foreign import of little real consequence, and excluding a fleeting concern following the *Daily Herald* case, this view of British fascism was also shared by the mainstream left. It is worth emphasising, however, that the extremist wing of the labour movement paid fascism considerably more attention, a consequence of events in Italy where fascism had been interpreted by the CPGB as a violent and lawless anti-working-class phenomenon.

Prior to 1925, a narrow circle of left-wing radicals actively opposed the British Fascists. Meetings were disrupted and attempts were made to create specific anti-fascist organisations. Following the kidnapping of Pollitt and with the formation of the OMS, the leadership of the communist left did begin to take British 'fascism' seriously. The CPGB leadership focused on the dangers of fascism in 1925 and through the means of a Workers' Defence Corps greater effort was directed towards establishing fully fledged anti-fascist organisations. However, the fact that these organisations did not develop into substantive national movements with mass support, and the fact that oppositional confrontations with the British Fascists and the National Fascisti remained sporadic and small-scale, demonstrates that anti-fascism in the 1920s failed to achieve national significance. The extent of anti-fascism in the 1920s was merely proportional to the political insignificance of domestic fascism. Nonetheless, it remains an important consideration that home-grown fascism did not go unchallenged in the 1920s.

II

If anti-fascism was born in the 1920s, it was in the 1930s when it truly came of age. The well-documented mass mobilisation of between 100,000 and 300,000 people against a planned march by Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists through the East End of London on 4 October 1936, is frequently celebrated as one of the most dramatic mass mobilisations in Britain's modern political history. The 'Battle of Cable Street' left an enduring mark on the history of anti-fascism, assuming legendary status as a particularly impressive illustration of popular, spontaneous anti-fascist opposition. However, this depiction is unfortunate as it tempts historians to focus on Cable Street as the principal event in the inter-war period, without giving due consideration to preceding events. By focusing on Cable Street, anti-fascism does not appear to possess any developmental dynamic in its own right. The emphasis on the 'popular' and the 'spontaneous' obscures anti-fascism's organisational features; neglects the causal factors in the strengths and weaknesses of different anti-fascist organisations; fails to draw out different anti-fascist analyses and strategic positions; in short, it downplays the structure and complexity of anti-fascist opposition. Furthermore, because Cable Street was such a 'spectacular' event, its contribution to the failure of British fascism is typically exaggerated. Even amongst those historians who avoid preoccupation with Cable Street and discuss the

importance of earlier anti-fascist opposition, a number have fallen into the additional trap of either viewing events from a skewed ‘metropolitan’ perspective which focuses on incidents in London and neglects local dimensions, or viewing events from a local perspective without reference to other parts of Britain.

Mosley’s biographer, Robert Skidelsky, was right to open his account of anti-fascist/fascist confrontations *before* the founding of the BUF in October 1932. Ignoring the 1920s, Skidelsky argues that the formative period of anti-fascist opposition was 1930–1 with the CPGB identifying Mosley as a ‘potential’ or ‘incipient fascist’.³⁵ His New Party³⁶ meetings were subject to frequent disruption and it was common for opponents to accuse Mosley of ‘fascism’. Since it was the CPGB’s paper, the *Daily Worker*, that was labelling the New Party ‘fascist’ it would seem safe to suppose that these hecklers were Communists. Yet Mosley’s acrimonious departure from the Labour Party in 1931 engendered considerable hostility within Labour’s ranks too and it is clear that significant opposition also came from Labour Party supporters. This animosity expressed itself most clearly at the Ashton-under-Lyne by-election in April 1931, contested by the New Party and previously a safe Labour seat. Labour anger was exacerbated when the Conservative Party candidate won the seat, a victory which Labour supporters felt had resulted from a split in the working-class vote caused by the intervention of Mosley’s New Party. John Strachey,³⁷ later to become a leading anti-fascist, but at the time a key figure in the New Party, famously remarked that it was at this point, with the incensed crowd expressing its anger, that Mosley embraced fascism:

The crowd was violently hostile to Mosley and the New party. It roared at him, and, as he stood facing it, he said to me, ‘That is the crowd that has prevented anyone doing anything in England since the war’. At that moment British Fascism was born.³⁸

Mosley reacted to his antagonists with an activist youth movement (NUPA) with semi-fascist trappings before moving towards outright fascism in the wake of the abysmal failure of the New Party in the October 1931 general election. Tellingly, this campaign had been marked by a hardening of Communist-inspired opposition. The fiercest confrontation occurred on 18 October 1931 at Birmingham’s Rag Market when a section in the 15,000 crowd, wielding chairs and chair legs, charged Mosley’s platform. Notwithstanding some oversimplification in Strachey’s comments, it is certainly ironic that ‘anti-fascism’ may well have played a role in Mosley’s turn towards fascism, but we should bear in mind that more than anti-fascism, Labour’s anger was driven first and foremost by feelings of betrayal.³⁹

If the left’s opposition to Mosley and the New Party had been driven entirely by ‘anti-fascism’ then one would expect a far more animated response from the labour movement when the unequivocally fascist BUF was formed in October 1932. Yet according to BUF sources, between October 1932 and March 1933 less than 3 per cent of BUF meetings resulted in disorder.⁴⁰ Between the New Party’s farcical failure at the polls in October 1931 and the formation of the BUF a year later,

Labour Party opposition to Mosley, born more from betrayal than anti-fascism, subsided. Active Labour Party hostility was not sustained into the first few months of the BUF, but Mosley certainly did encounter isolated opposition from small groups of Communists who were responsible for the more visible interruptions of BUF meetings in London in late 1932.⁴¹ Although isolated, this violent opposition occasioned some concern in the CPGB's Central Committee. Reservations about the desirability of combative anti-fascism were expressed amongst the CPGB leadership. Belligerent tactics had backfired on the party when Communists and fascists had engaged in a gang fight at a BUF meeting in London's St Pancras. Workers in the audience had apparently left the meeting with the impression that Communists had deliberately provoked violence.⁴²

When comparing the New Party phase with the very opening BUF phase one can identify a downward trend in conflict between Mosley and left-wing opponents. Yet this trend did begin to reverse with the appointment of Adolf Hitler as Chancellor of Germany in January 1933 and the victory at the polls in March of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP, or Nazi Party). This focused the attention of the left on the British Union of Fascists, allowing anti-fascism to gather greater momentum. By violently attacking the German Social Democratic Party, Communist Party and trade unions, Nazism inflamed emotions on the left and in due course, '[t]ransnational passions were thus inevitably concentrated on national movements', as Skidelsky observed.⁴³

In early March 1933 – the NSDAP had just won 43.9 per cent of the vote in the Reichstag elections – the Communist Party, with some 5,400 members, approached the Labour Party, trade unions and Co-operative Party with a proposal for joint activity in a 'united front' against fascism. Moscow directed national communist parties to seek co-operation with social-democratic parties in the fight against fascism, the clear consequence of events in Germany where the victory of Hitler had demonstrated the futility of left-wing sectarianism. It also reflected the fact that the German Communist Party, locked into the Comintern's 'class against class' doctrine, had denounced Social Democracy as reformist capitalism and had castigated Social Democrats as 'class enemies' or 'social fascists'. The resulting Communist–Social Democrat disunity had allowed room for the Nazis to seize power and subject the left to immediate persecution. The 'class against class' principle had been adopted by the British Communist Party in 1928 but its adoption had generated considerable division within the CPGB's ranks.⁴⁴ Consequently, when the call came in March 1933 for a 'united front' there was little disagreement amongst the CPGB, especially given the gravity of the situation in Germany.

At the same time the Communist Party engaged in shows of anti-fascist opposition. On 12 March 1933, at a BUF meeting in Manchester's Free Trade Hall, the local branch of the CPGB distributed an anti-fascist manifesto entitled 'Unity against Fascist Reaction', which was addressed to all members of the Labour Party, trade unions, Co-ops and the ILP. Communists disrupted Mosley's meeting by chanting in unison, 'Up with Russia! Down with Mosley!' and by singing the 'Red Flag'.⁴⁵ The objective was to impede the speaker's audibility, thereby preventing the BUF

from getting its message across. As a tactic it had ample potential. Opponents acting in groups could disrupt even the largest meetings but the BUF reacted quickly by creating a 'Fascist Defence Force', comprising strong-arm stewards who would eject offenders, frequently leading to violent disturbances. This Defence Force was activated at Manchester and not surprisingly fighting ensued. The *Manchester Guardian* (13 March 1933) reported that the 'centre gangway was filled with people fighting'. The clash at Manchester Free Trade Hall was hailed by the CPGB as a victory over the BUF and undoubtedly provided inspiration for small groups of Communists to lay siege to a BUF branch office in Walworth Road in London for over a fortnight in March 1933. On 28 March, an organised raid damaged fixtures and fittings and, according to BUF sources, an attempt was made to set fire to the staircase.⁴⁶

The CPGB's call for the united front won support from the ILP. The ILP, which had disaffiliated from the Labour Party in 1932, was twice the size of the Communist Party in 1933, with some 11,000 members.⁴⁷ These two groups comprised the militant wing of the labour movement, but if the CPGB was staunchly revolutionary, a more pragmatic ILP contained a spectrum of opinion from revolutionary to reformist. The leadership of the ILP, centred on Fenner Brockway and James Maxton, was deeply critical of Moscow's control over the Communist International and was uneasy about collaboration with the CPGB. Nevertheless, the ILP decided to co-operate in anti-fascist activities and accepted the CPGB's invitation for joint action despite further fears that the Communists were intent on hijacking its membership. The ILP looked for support on the Labour Party left and hoped to convince the Socialist League (established in 1932 by those opposed to disaffiliation from the Labour Party) to join with them in the 'united front'.⁴⁸

However, the Labour Party (and the affiliated Socialist League), TUC and Co-operative Party all rejected the CPGB's proposals. Labour point-blank refused a deputation from the CPGB and ILP. The National Joint Council, which represented the Labour Party, the TUC and the Parliamentary Labour Party, published the reasons for its rebuttal in *Democracy versus Dictatorship* issued on 24 March 1933. In this manifesto Labour argued that it was fear of communist dictatorship that led to the rise of fascism. Therefore, radical action by the left, of the type proposed by the CPGB, would only encourage fascist reaction. This manifesto not only incriminated communism for being responsible for fascism, but also accused communism of dictatorship. It maintained that since both communism and fascism obliterated parliamentary democracy, communism was commensurate with fascism. In contrast, the Labour Party was constitutional, it stood for the defence of democracy and freedom, therefore it could not possibly countenance co-operation with the Communist Party. Besides, the Communists had previously attacked the Labour Party and TUC, especially during the 'class against class' phase, and the CPGB's disruptive tactics had hardly fostered an atmosphere of mutual respect and co-operation. The Labour Party had little to gain from collaboration with the CPGB, given that 'the sheer disparity of size between the Labour Party and the T.U.C. on the one hand, and five or six thousand Communists on the other, made the idea of a "united front" between these organisations seem ludicrous'.⁴⁹

Instead of militant action, the anti-fascist policy of the Labour Party stressed moderation. It maintained that the British state was deeply democratic boasting a liberal-democratic tradition that would in normal circumstances act as a barrier against fascism. However, in the event of economic collapse, the political system could be undermined and if, in this situation, the Labour Party joined forces with the Communists in militant action against fascism, there was a real danger of a fascist upsurge. Thus, the Labour Party warned against working-class militancy, hoped for economic recovery, and anchored its anti-fascism to the democratic state. The result of this analysis was that the Labour Party's anti-fascist policy developed from 1934 onwards in a 'twin-track' direction. In the first place, stress was placed on educating workers to the dangers of fascism (and communism). Second, there were calls for the democratic state to legislate against fascism, which ultimately culminated in Labour Party support for the Public Order Act in 1936.⁵⁰

The Labour Party's discouragement of anti-fascist militancy was intended to send a message to any potential backers of fascism that Labour did not constitute an ultra-left threat. Labour's attachment to constitutionalism also ensured that the existing liberal-democratic consensus was not challenged from within the mainstream. Thus, political space for the illiberal and anti-democratic ideology of the British Union of Fascists was restricted. In this way, the anti-fascist policy of the Labour Party contributed to the marginalisation of British fascism by reinforcing the prevailing consensus behind political moderation and parliamentary traditions. As Roger Griffin has explained, where liberal democracy enjoys general acceptance, 'viable' space for radically alternative ideologies is necessarily restricted.⁵¹ The situation in inter-war Italy and Germany was entirely different. Here, socio-economic crisis shattered a very weak liberal consensus and this opened up space for extremist ideologies whilst also making political violence by fascists more socially acceptable. The CPGB, however, mistakenly assumed that the situation in Britain in 1933 replicated that in Germany before the Nazi acquisition of power. Accordingly, it wrongly attacked Labour's position as analogous to the German Social Democratic position which, it claimed, had facilitated the Nazi victory by rejecting the possibility of mass action.

The CPGB's reply to Labour's anti-fascist policy took the form of a scathing pamphlet, *Democracy and Fascism*, authored by Rajani Palme Dutt. Refusing to accept that communism could take the blame for fascism, Palme Dutt returned the charge. Rounding on the Labour Party, he denigrated its attitude. According to Palme Dutt, Labour's position was a mirror image of the policy of the German Social Democrats, a recipe for disaster and for the victory of fascism:

The line of the Labour Party is the line of German Social Democracy, the line of bidding the workers trust in capitalist 'democracy', which has led to the disaster of the working class in Germany and the victory of Fascism. This same line will lead to the victory of Fascism in Britain, if the workers do not correct it in time. The workers must be warned in time of the lying and hypocritical character of the Labour Party's propaganda of 'democracy' in the abstract,

which covers in reality betrayal of the working class, servitude to capitalism, and, finally, surrender to Fascism.⁵²

Palme Dutt implored all militant workers in every trade union branch and local Labour Party to agitate for joint action and disregard the instructions of the Labour leadership, and, in due course, the Communist Party's appeal to the rank and file within the labour movement met considerable sympathy. Although Labour leaders rejected joint action, such was the fervency of reaction to Hitler's accession to power and subsequent persecution of the German left, that there was unofficial co-operation between both militant and moderate wings of the labour movement in the fight against domestic fascism. This co-operation occurred at grassroots level either through loose association or through support for various local united front committees. For all the rivalry, the distrust and antagonism between the Labour Party and the Communist Party, the emotive issue of fascism fostered significant degrees of collaboration at local level.

As anti-fascism gathered pace from early 1933, Labour Party members began to participate in anti-fascist activities, frequently acting on their own initiative in the absence of an active lead from either the Labour Party or the TUC. Local studies of anti-fascism corroborate this point. David Renton details the creation of the anti-fascist Oxford Council of Action in May 1933. Albeit short-lived, this was a broad-based group, with around 100 members representing some 40 organisations, including the local Labour Party and trade unions. In a similar study of the Medway Towns, David Turner notes the launching of a local Anti-Fascist Campaign Committee in May 1933 which had the support of leading figures in the Chatham Labour Party, as well as support from the ILP and CPGB (though co-operation with the radical left in this particular united front did trigger factional conflict leading to its eventual rejection by the local Labour Party). According to Todd's local study of anti-fascism, despite the Labour Party's official line, a number of Labour councillors in Sunderland supported an anti-fascist united front committee, formed in 1933 by the Communist Party, ILP and the militant National Unemployed Workers' Movement (NUWM).⁵³ The Young Communist League often found local Labour League of Youth branches willing to co-operate in joint anti-fascist activity. Dylan Murphy's local study, for example, found that in Leeds at least three League of Youth branches came out in support of a united front during 1933.⁵⁴

Since the mainstay of anti-fascism was localised united front action, such action was strongest in large urban, industrial areas with the most vigorous and inclusive left-wing traditions. It should not be forgotten, however, that the anti-fascist opposition also embraced support from non-left elements, as Frederic Mullally notes 'though it suited Mosley to label them all "Reds", they were made up of Communists, Socialists, trade unionists, Liberals and – to their credit – a sprinkling of honest anti-fascist Tories'. With the emphasis falling on local activity, the general organisational character of anti-fascism was loose-knit and ill-defined. Again according to Mullally, it was therefore obvious that:

such an opposition completely lacked organisation or an integrated plan of action; it was made up of far-sighted individuals who were alive to the menace of fascism right from the start and who had the courage to demonstrate their faith whenever a Blackshirt meeting was held in their districts.⁵⁵

In reality, despite wide involvement in various locally based initiatives, anti-fascist activity by Labour Party members in 1933 was at its most visible in opposition to Hitler's Germany. The Labour Party leadership had given official backing to such activity with a call to boycott German goods. The National Joint Council organised protests against Hitler in London in the spring of 1933. It also published *Down with Fascism*, a pamphlet written by Joseph Compton, then Chairman of Labour's National Executive Committee. However, one association, the Relief Committee for the Victims of German Fascism, was giving Labour cause for concern because of its links with the Communist Party and the Comintern. At its first conference in May 1933, a Labour peer, Lord Marley, was in the chair and a number of high-profile Labour Party members were on the platform, such as Ellen Wilkinson and Dorothy Woodman. The platform was shared with leading Communist and ILP speakers, which was also the case at further meetings, attracting audiences of some 2,500 and 4,000. The Communist Party had taken a leading role in the campaign to assist the victims of Nazism through its ancillary organisation, International Labour Defence (ILD), and was now focusing its efforts on the Relief Committee (an organisation sponsored by the Comintern's Willi Meunzenberg). This moved the Labour Party to publish *The Communist Solar System* in September 1933, which was a list of proscribed Communist 'auxiliary' organisations. The list included the Relief Committee for the Victims of German Fascism, to the obvious annoyance of Labour Party supporters such as Ellen Wilkinson who criticised the Labour leadership for having no regard for the anti-fascist feelings of its rank and file.⁵⁶ In theory, the Labour Party reserved the right to expel any member who belonged to, supported or even appeared as a speaker at any meetings of Communist 'auxiliary' organisations; in practice, the authority of the Labour Party over its members was more a 'moral' authority that came to depend largely upon persuasion rather than compulsion.

With the Labour Party refusing to offer a strong lead for anti-fascism, the radical left established itself at the forefront of physical opposition to the British Union of Fascists. From March 1933, confrontations between left-wing militants and the BUF showed signs of increasing frequency, especially in London, although this trend was denied by the BUF, which insisted that opposition in the 'old New Party days' was much more pronounced.⁵⁷ Arrests were made at a BUF march through the West End on 14 May 1933. Disturbances occurred at BUF meetings at Edmonton in May and June 1933; there was disorder at Deptford and East Ham in July; Acton, Kilburn, Deptford, St John's Wood and Wood Green in October, with further disturbances at Wood Green in November 1933. The BUF's own paper, *The Blackshirt* (17 April 1933) reported that four members of the BUF were attacked following an anti-fascist demonstration in Trafalgar Square, and also reported violence at meetings in Brixton and Battersea.⁵⁸

Yet other disturbances point to the existence of specific Jewish opposition that interestingly predates the BUF's turn towards militant anti-Semitism in the mid-1930s. The *Daily Worker* (2 May 1933) reported a disturbance in Piccadilly Circus when cinema crowds, with a significant Jewish element, 'jostled' BUF paper sellers on to the steps of the Eros statue. Surrounded by a large crowd, missiles were thrown and fighting ensued. A further disturbance occurred a week later in similar circumstances in Coventry Street, when a crowd of around 200 people witnessed a fracas between Jews and 12 BUF members selling papers.⁵⁹ These confrontations between Jews and BUF news vendors appear to have been largely spontaneous responses, undoubtedly induced by Jewish persecution in Germany. Angered by events in Germany, these Jews did not distinguish between the BUF's brand of fascism which at the time harboured anti-Semitism, and Hitler's variety which propagated it to the extreme.⁶⁰ The proportion of Jews involved in these disturbances that were Communist Party supporters is impossible to determine, but there was certainly an overlap with the militant left: the ILD later held protest meetings in the East End in support of those arrested in connection with these disturbances. This demonstrated the eagerness of the Communist Party to arouse anti-fascist feeling amongst the Jewish population in the East End and confirms the existence of anti-fascist attitudes in this area long before the BUF's penetration in the mid-1930s.

Unlike the 1920s, when confrontations between fascists and anti-fascists were mostly restricted to London, conflict between Mosley's BUF and anti-fascist opposition quickly extended beyond London into provincial areas. Events in Manchester have been mentioned, but other notable clashes occurred in Stockton-on-Tees in September 1933, and in Oxford in November 1933. According to one former BUF member, the small branch in Stockton-on-Tees faced considerable hostility from the local Communist Party in 1933, with individual members attacked and meetings disrupted. The BUF bussed activists in from Manchester and Tyneside, to march alongside the Teesside contingent in a show of force to Stockton's Market Square on 10 September 1933. As the BUF's speakers addressed the meeting, they were continually heckled and booed by a group of left-wing militants, leading the Defence Force to weigh into the crowd, resulting in serious hand-to-hand fighting. One BUF activist sustained a serious eye injury; it was claimed that another was struck from behind with an iron bar.⁶¹ The meeting was closed by police, the fascists were escorted to buses followed by an angry crowd of some 1,000 demonstrators, a far larger number than the initial anti-fascist antagonists.⁶²

This incident is an early illustration of the willingness of Blackshirts to engage in violence – their physical prowess was important to them; they were, after all, virile and muscular new 'fascist' men (or at least they saw themselves in these terms). As one 'Lady Blackshirt' wrote,

As a looker-on, but not a participant during the fracas between Fascist and Communist at Stockton-on-Tees, I am proud of the clean and manly way the

blackshirts put the Communists to rout [...] Fairplay for Mosley's Blackshirts, a clean, manly organisation against the riff-raff of so-called Communism.⁶³

Yet, as later events at Olympia in June 1934 would confirm, the BUF's use of physical force played directly into the hands of anti-fascists. So even if this violence was instigated more frequently by anti-fascists than fascists, that the BUF's lack of restraint carried the potential to broaden hostility was recognised at an early stage by anti-fascists who looked to use fascist violence as a way of denying the BUF political and social respectability. With this in mind, anti-fascists could deliberately overstate the extent of BUF violence. Stephen Cullen⁶⁴ has argued that one such occasion was the response to Mosley's meeting at Oxford Town Hall in November 1933. At a protest meeting called by prominent Oxford dons to expose the violence used by the Blackshirts at Oxford Town Hall, anti-fascists alleged that fascist stewards thrust fingers up noses wearing gloves with metal rings and knuckledusters. There were also, as David Shermer notes, stories 'told of needles being driven into the testicles of hecklers and of castor oil being forced down recalcitrant throats'.⁶⁵ As Cullen points out however, a local police report in the Home Office files makes no mention of any fascist stewards wearing knuckledusters and where this report remained private, the anti-fascist version of events was heard publicly in a crowded meeting and was reported in the press. Not surprisingly, the adverse publicity that this generated did not do much to enhance the BUF's local reputation.

III

Despite the flurry of negative publicity surrounding the incidents in Oxford and elsewhere, in January 1934 the BUF secured the support of Lord Rothermere's *Daily Mail* and other Rothermere papers, such as the *Sunday Pictorial*, *Sunday Dispatch*, *Evening News* (and rarely commented upon, the *Daily Mirror*⁶⁶). Rothermere had already praised both Mussolini and Hitler for their strident anti-communism and youthful dynamism. What he saw in Mosley was a radical Conservatism which he hoped would break the grip of 'Old Gang' politicians and infuse Britain with fascist-style vitality. Rothermere's influential backing allowed the BUF's membership to increase substantially to 17–18,000 by the beginning of February 1934, rising towards 50,000 by June 1934.⁶⁷ The infamous 'Hurrah for the Blackshirts!' article in the *Daily Mail* on 15 January 1934 opened the campaign. The 'average *Daily Mail* reader is a potential Blackshirt ready made', the *Spectator* quipped.⁶⁸ To capitalise on Rothermere's support, the BUF instructed branch organisers to write letters of support to the *Daily Mail* (the letters would have to give the impression that they had been written by members of the public and not BUF members). The idea was to furnish Rothermere with the impression that most of the country was fascist and that he would thenceforth assist the BUF 'even more energetically'.⁶⁹ The *Evening News* offered 500 seats at Mosley's rally at the Royal Albert Hall in April 1934 as prizes to readers in a Blackshirt competition; the *Sunday Dispatch* even ran a beauty contest for Blackshirt women.

Rothermere's fulsome support for the BUF afforded united front anti-fascism further impetus. That it also coincided with the violent suppression of Social Democrats in Vienna by the 'Austro-fascist' Dollfuss regime, and the extreme right-wing riots in Paris that would lead to reconciliation between the Socialists and Communists in France, was significant too. Sensing their moment, the Communist Party and Independent Labour Party renewed attempts to establish a united front with Labour in February 1934, but once again advances were rejected. Labour Party Secretary Arthur Henderson did meet with the ILP's Brockway and Maxton, but the exclusion of the Communist Party from the united front was, for Labour, non-negotiable. Whilst willing to provide humanitarian relief for workers in Austria, the Labour Party leadership remained steadfastly opposed to direct action against fascism in Britain. So without organisational backing from the Labour Party leadership, anti-fascist opposition lacked structural cohesion. The official line of the Labour Party leadership, as David Lewis observed, meant that 'the united front was prevented from expressing itself as a nation-wide campaign', leaving by default a loose patchwork of local anti-fascist organisations.⁷⁰

Within this organisational mosaic, anti-fascism became focused on the British Anti-War Movement, especially in Communist Party circles in London. The British Anti-War Movement, the British branch of the World Committee Against War and Fascism, was a Communist Party 'satellite' organisation. It had been included in Labour's list of proscribed organisations and thus considered out of bounds. In March 1934, in renaming its monthly bulletin 'Fight War and Fascism', the British Anti-War Movement drew on a perceived convergence between anti-fascism and pacifism. Its aim was to fight war and fascism simultaneously, interpreting fascism as the means by which the ruling class in the capitalist state subjugates the working class through militaristic organisation. Significantly, the Chairman of the British Anti-War Movement was John Strachey. Since his break with Mosley, Strachey had gravitated towards Communist circles, having authored a polemical work, *The Menace of Fascism*, which had gone on to sell close to 5,000 copies.⁷¹ Having penned this work in order to maximise opposition to the Labour Party's refusal to form a broad united front, Strachey opined that Labour's policy, 'if it is followed to the end by the British workers, must lead them, with a positively mathematical inevitability, to their defeat, ruin and massacre'.⁷² From his leading position in the British Anti-War Movement, Strachey looked towards steering an emerging anti-fascist movement which had, by the spring of 1934, already widened to include industry-specific groups as well as non-left groups.

In response to Rothermere's support for fascism, the pro-Communist Printing and Allied Trades Anti-Fascist Movement was established at a meeting in Kingsway Hall in London in March 1934 with over 500 volunteers signing membership forms. This group – the first group of organised workers in the country to start their own anti-fascist movement – included machine-minders from the *Daily Mail* and *Evening News*. It pledged itself to the defence of all printing workers who refused to print or handle fascist propaganda.⁷³ Other workplace anti-fascist groups

were established too, including groups from the London Transport Workers, Distributive Workers, and King's Cross Railwaymen.

There was also anti-fascist organisation that stretched beyond the Communist milieu. Two notable anti-fascist groups active in London during 1934 were the Green Shirts and New World Fellowship. The first of these followed the economic doctrine of Social Credit pioneered by Clifford Hugh Douglas.⁷⁴ His most enthusiastic followers in Britain were led by John Hargrave, who formed the Green Shirts in 1932 as the 'militant' wing of Social Credit. At the opening of the National Headquarters in London in July 1932, Hargrave had positioned the Green Shirts in opposition to fascism (and communism). This anti-fascist stance was substantiated as early as January 1933 when disorder followed a fascist meeting in Crouch End in London after Mosley refused to reply to dogged questioning by a Green Shirt activist. In April 1933 some 80 Green Shirts had participated in an anti-fascist demonstration in Hyde Park; in June 1933 a group of Green Shirts had demonstrated outside BUF offices in London's Regent Street, only to be dispersed by police. In February 1934, at a time when the Green Shirts claimed 2–3,000 followers,⁷⁵ the BUF had taken matters into their own hands when two Green Shirts chalked anti-fascist slogans on the shutters of the BUF's office at Grosvenor Place in London, and were subsequently 'arrested' by BUF members and subjected to a violent assault.⁷⁶

New World Fellowship (NWF), an organisation originally formed in 1932, protested outside Mosley's first large meeting at London's Royal Albert Hall on 22 April 1934. NWF activists had attempted to distribute anti-fascist leaflets but had been dispersed by police.⁷⁷ The NWF opposed fascism on the basis that it constituted a threat to democracy. It published a weekly, *Green Band*, which it referred to as the 'only militant organ of anti-fascism'. In truth, the NWF was far from militant: it objected to physical force anti-fascism – a key part of its anti-fascist strategy was for the NWF to meet fascists in debate. It was non-sectarian and its constitution declared that no party politics of any kind would be discussed at any of its meetings or on any official occasion. The problem, however, was that the BUF showed little interest in debating with opponents.⁷⁸ During a six-month period in 1934 when the NWF was at its most active, it claimed to have held nearly 60 meetings in London and other large cities, addressed approximately 15,000 people on a weekly basis, and distributed over 1 million leaflets and booklets.⁷⁹ The NWF supported the idea of a united front against fascism, but only under the banner of the New World Fellowship.

Significantly, at Mosley's Royal Albert Hall meeting in April 1934 – attended by 8–9,000 people – it had been noted by the far left that despite the presence of small groups of left-wing militants, opposition to Mosley had been low key and noticeably ineffectual. Anti-fascists dressed in black shirts had managed to slip past stewards and distribute a pamphlet, *British Fascism Explained*, but there was no visible opposition inside the hall and given the relative meagreness of the opposition outside, a need for greater organisation and planning of anti-fascist activities in London was now manifestly clear. This was accepted by the London Communist Party which resolved to organise much more effectively against Mosley's next

showpiece meeting, to take place at Olympia (with a seating capacity of 15,000) on 7 June 1934.

In the months preceding Olympia, major centres of anti-fascist activity outside London were Edinburgh, Bristol, Plymouth and Newcastle upon Tyne. The BUF press reported that a hostile crowd had broken up a fascist meeting at the Mound in Edinburgh in February 1934.⁸⁰ Disturbances involving Communists were recorded outside a BUF meeting at Colston Hall in Bristol on 28 March 1934. Fighting was also occurring on a weekly basis at BUF meetings in Plymouth, where around 30 Communists were leading militant anti-fascism.⁸¹ At Plymouth Corn Exchange on 26 April, around 100 joined in a mass brawl with chairs being used as weapons. This had come in the wake of a BUF meeting on 16 April where, according to Home Office sources, a ‘rowdy communist element’ had been present.⁸² Indeed, as early as February 1933, there had been considerable heckling of BUF speakers in the Market Square at Plymouth.⁸³

However, by far the most significant events, involving substantial numbers of people, occurred in Newcastle. Events in Newcastle demonstrate that although anti-fascism lacked broad organisational structure, ‘united front’ activities could find more distinctive anti-fascist form and additionally encourage wide public participation. The events in Newcastle have been documented in a local study by Nigel Todd⁸⁴ and therefore only require a brief summary.

In May 1934, a united front Anti-Fascist League (AFL) was established on Tyneside which immediately recruited some 200 members. These anti-fascists were also known locally as ‘Grey Shirts’ and drew their support in the main from the ILP and the Communist Party.⁸⁵ On 13 May 1934, local BUF organiser and former Labour MP for Gateshead, John Beckett,⁸⁶ was confronted by a large hostile crowd at an open-air meeting in Newcastle where Beckett was lambasted for his ‘treachery’. Apparently inspired by the AFL, the crowd rushed the BUF platform. Indignant anti-fascists then lay siege to the BUF’s local headquarters, attacking it with missiles. The next day, Beckett attempted to address a meeting at Gateshead Town Hall but was subjected to anti-fascist heckling. Outside, he faced yet another antagonistic crowd, but this time it was estimated that it had grown to an imposing 10,000 people. Beckett was subsequently escorted back to the local headquarters by mounted police where once again the BUF’s local offices were subjected to a hostile siege. Todd identifies these anti-fascist counter-demonstrations as the ‘turning point’ in the local fortunes of the BUF on Tyneside. Beckett bid a hasty retreat to London, Mosley postponed an open-air rally on the Town Moor, and the local BUF was forced to shift activities away from Newcastle and Gateshead towards other areas in a fruitless search for new recruits.

Parallel to events in Newcastle, the Communist Party in London became actively engaged in preparations for Olympia. According to a Special Branch report, two or three leading members of the CPGB had made a ‘tour of inspection’ of Olympia’s surrounding neighbourhood in order to familiarise themselves with the layout. It noted that the CPGB had a prearranged plan to sit groups in different parts of the hall, with each group shouting slogans in turn. The report concluded

that the Communist Party was ‘making every effort to bring off a spectacular coup against the fascists’ and that, in part, this was intended ‘to counteract the loss of prestige the Party has suffered in recent by-elections’. A further report noted that, in addition to making frequent announcements in the *Daily Worker*, the London District Secretariat had sent out a circular to all ‘street and factory cells’, had issued an invitation to the trade unions, Labour Party and Independent Labour Party to co-operate in the proposed counter-demonstration, and had distributed leaflets. Furthermore, the Young Communist League (YCL) distributed a pamphlet, *Ten Points against Fascism*, and issued special invitations to the Labour League of Youth and the ILP Guild of Youth.⁸⁷ Unsurprisingly, the Labour Party and the London Trades Council snubbed the invitations, but local Labour Leagues of Youth pledged support in defiance of the Labour Party leadership. This refusal to conform to the strictures of the Labour Party’s anti-fascist policy was not as surprising as it first seems, given that the Labour Party’s League of Youth had been the target of considerable Communist ‘entryism’ since 1933 (a group of League of Youth activists had already distributed anti-fascist leaflets outside Mosley’s meeting at the Royal Albert Hall). Aside from the League of Youth, support for the Olympia mobilisation also came from the ILP, the ILP Guild of Youth, furnishing trade unionists, busmen, the catering branch of the Transport and General Workers’ Union, building workers, and the Printing and Allied Trades Anti-Fascist Movement.⁸⁸

The CPGB was especially active amongst the Jewish community in London’s East End and on 7 June, the largest contingent numbering some 150 gathered at a pre-Olympia meeting point in Stepney Green, led by Ted Bramley, Secretary of the London Communist Party. The other rendezvous points were Mornington Crescent, Battersea Park Road and Harrow Road. Contingents from these four meeting places descended on Olympia and were joined by Communists and other anti-fascists who made their way independently (the *Daily Worker* published instructions and a map on how to get to Olympia). A Special Branch report noted that by 7.45 pm, around 1,000 people had gathered outside, with slogans being shouted and anti-fascist literature distributed. It also noted that a motor car was being used by Communist leaders in order to direct operations.⁸⁹ Inside Olympia, several hundred anti-fascists were scattered amongst a capacity audience, many of whom had forged tickets.

As Mosley began to speak, he encountered heckling; he paused, the spotlight shone on the offenders. Hopelessly outnumbered by fascist stewards – the BUF had as many as 1,000 stewards in the hall – hecklers were then forcefully ejected. Legislation dating from 1908 allowed the organisers of public meetings to use their own stewards to ensure order and they could deploy ‘reasonable force’ in doing so, but with no fewer than 24 loudspeakers, was it really necessary for Mosley repeatedly to stop the proceedings? According to Tory MP Geoffrey Lloyd, Mosley’s ‘tactics were calculated to exaggerate the effect of the most trivial interruption and provide an apparent excuse for the violence of the Blackshirts’.⁹⁰ The historian Martin Pugh believes that the most likely explanation for the disorder was the size of the venue and the systematic nature of the interruption – not ordinary

heckling – which left stewards frustrated. As a result they resorted to violence.⁹¹ Special Branch reported that those ejected received particularly fierce treatment by Blackshirts in the foyer. One BUF activist recalled being responsible for opening the street doors ‘so that the Reds could be thrown out. As the struggle went on and tempers rose, “thrown” was the operative word’.⁹² Crowds outside, subjected to charges by mounted police, witnessed anti-fascists being ejected through the doors, many were bleeding, clothes were torn, some victims were said to be verging on collapse. It was further reported that one doctor had seen between 50 and 70 victims.⁹³ The House of Commons was later informed that 14 people had been treated by hospitals (one Blackshirt); 36 people had been arrested.⁹⁴

Mosley had invited many prominent people to Olympia; an impressive gathering of the great and the good: no fewer than 150 MPs were there; the press also turned out in force. The evening’s dramatic events were all set to make front-page headlines. As the official historian of the BUF, Richard Reynell Bellamy, put it, ‘[n]ext day Britain resounded to indignant voices denouncing the fascist atrocities’.⁹⁵ Mosley claimed victory over the ‘Reds’: it was ‘another milestone in the fascist advance’.⁹⁶ However, leading politicians, establishment figures and the press (with the notable exception of the Rothermere stable) were generally shocked at the ferocity of the stewards. Notwithstanding a vocal minority from the Conservative right who had some sympathy with Blackshirt methods, the outcry over Olympia confirmed the extent to which, even in the depths of economic depression, the British establishment remained attached to liberal-democratic procedures and values. Olympia was widely interpreted as a great success for anti-fascism despite Labour Party claims that the Communist Party had damaged the anti-fascist cause and had given Mosley unnecessary publicity. A troubled Walter Citrine declared in an urgent memorandum that the National Joint Council should make it clear that it ‘repudiates the organised interruption indulged in by the Communists’.⁹⁷ Although the BUF experienced an overnight surge in recruitment (presumably by those attracted to the prospect of violence), it is clear that by revealing the BUF’s sinister side, the longer-term effect was to alienate potential support from within the establishment in particular and from within society in general.

It is commonly held that events at Olympia led Rothermere to drop his backing for British fascism, thereby breaking the BUF’s base of support, leaving Mosley isolated and beyond the pale. For sure, Rothermere’s decision to withdraw his endorsement of the BUF in July 1934 was a decisive factor in reversing the fortunes of British fascism. However, Olympia did not sever this relationship. Even following the violent scenes at Olympia, the *Daily Mail* remained unapologetic:

The crime of the Blackshirts, it appeared on maturer investigation, was that they had protected themselves in very difficult circumstances [...] There was no other course if free speech was to be maintained and the right of public meeting. The Red hooligans have not the faintest claim to public sympathy.⁹⁸

Mosley would later make it known that it was withdrawal of Jewish advertising revenue that caused Rothermere to break with the BUF (Rothermere claimed that

the break was in part due to BUF's adoption of anti-Semitism). Violent events in Germany, where the 'Night of the Long Knives' on 30 June had established a clear link between 'foreign' methods of violence and the BUF, may have been a factor too. For the security services, the break with Mosley was entirely 'a matter of business, no doubt' – circulation was in decline.⁹⁹

As a consequence of Olympia, the Communist Party became more widely recognised as the leading force in the struggle against Mosley's BUF. It brought significant financial rewards. In June 1934, Joseph Maggs, a director of United Dairies, donated £1,000 to the CPGB for its anti-fascist work.¹⁰⁰ The CPGB looked towards forming a 'United Anti-Fascist League' with the YCL, ILP, Labour League of Youth and the Green Shirts in preparation for Mosley's next scheduled meeting at White City on 5 August 1934. It was planned to bring transport and catering workers out on strike in order to prevent the transportation of fascists to the meeting and to stop refreshments from reaching the venue. However, Mosley's meeting was cancelled with the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Lord Trenchard, foreseeing even more serious disorder than Olympia as White City could potentially hold 80–90,000 people.¹⁰¹ The Metropolitan Police had requested the Chairman of the White City Board to demand a bond from Mosley to cover possible damage costs but this was deliberately set so high that Mosley was forced to cancel the booking.

As the idea of the United Anti-Fascist League was being proposed, an 'Anti-Fascist Special' was published by the CPGB which claimed that nuclei of a United Front Anti-Fascist Movement already existed in the British Anti-War Movement.¹⁰² This claim, which points to a rather confused organisational strategy, was also made by the Secretary of the British Anti-War Movement, Neil Hunter, in an article in the *Daily Worker* on 19 June 1934. In the aftermath of Olympia, various attempts were made by the Communist Party to give anti-fascism more organisational coherence but although the CPGB had emerged from Olympia as the leader of anti-fascism, organisation still remained vague and unco-ordinated. The Anti-Fascist Printers declared that they had 800 members ready to affiliate to a national anti-fascist movement should one be formed, and some groups were still active, such as New World Fellowship.¹⁰³

If the organisational basis of anti-fascism remained uncertain, the exposure of fascism at Olympia was the catalyst for a surge in anti-fascist feeling throughout London and elsewhere. In the days following Olympia, a BUF meeting in Hackney was abandoned; BUF meetings were also stopped at Edmonton, Southall, Hammersmith and St Pancras, and two fascists had to be escorted ignominiously from Finsbury Park by park keepers when surrounded by a hostile crowd. In June 1934, confrontations between fascists and anti-fascists also occurred at meetings at Regents Park, Notting Dale, Woolwich and Lewisham.¹⁰⁴ Outside London, the BUF experienced a particularly vigorous anti-fascist challenge in Plymouth and Glasgow, indicating the presence, as in Newcastle, of strong local cultures of anti-fascism. In Glasgow, a crowd of 2,000 anti-fascists lay siege to the local BUF office and 13 fascists were reportedly trapped inside.¹⁰⁵ In Plymouth, anti-fascist activity was sustained over the course of several days with local Communists and the

NUWM the driving force behind these activities. The immediate spark was a BUF meeting on 12 June and the arrest of a leading anti-fascist. When the anti-fascist was subsequently released, it was reported that he led a procession of 1,000 workers through the streets. The following day, an antagonistic crowd, reported to number some 2,000 processed to the BUF's offices in Lockyer Street. Although later dispersed by police, anti-fascist activities continued into a third day when there was a 'barrage of heckling' at a BUF meeting, with anti-fascists throwing missiles.¹⁰⁶ Given the wave of anti-fascist feeling after Olympia, even fascists in rural middle-class areas were not immune to the occasional missile attack: in Melksham in Wiltshire, on 21 June, a car was overturned and stones, eggs and fruit were thrown by anti-fascists at an unfortunate group of Blackshirts.¹⁰⁷

Anti-fascist demonstrations also followed in June 1934 in Leicester and Swansea, but there were no reports of disorder. At Leicester, where leading BUF figure A.K. Chesterton addressed a meeting at Oriental Hall, a counter-procession of anti-fascists brought a donkey along dressed in a blackshirt.¹⁰⁸ The largest counter-demonstration in the immediate aftermath of Olympia occurred during Mosley's visit to Sheffield City Hall on 28 June. This was organised by the CPGB and the ILP, under the auspices of the 'Sheffield United Action Committee' and set out to be the 'mightiest working-class demonstration ever known in Sheffield', attracting a crowd variously estimated at between 5,000 and 15,000. Anti-fascists 'paraded' the streets with banners reading 'Down with Mosley', 'Fight Fascism and War Now!', and distributing pamphlets urging people to demonstrate against 'Mosley and his thugs'. Increasingly conscious of Labour Party claims that the radical left was overly fond of causing disturbances, the focus of CPGB and ILP activity was on peaceful demonstration outside the hall, where speakers 'talked solidly' for over three hours.¹⁰⁹ The examples of Leicester, Swansea and Sheffield suggest that after Olympia, especially where 'mass action' was planned, the CPGB was keen to present itself as non-violent, responsible and law-abiding. Prior to Olympia, Pollitt had remarked to the CPGB's Central Committee that it would be fatal for the Communist Party if opposition to Mosley was regarded by workers 'as being in the nature of a brawl and not a real political struggle'.¹¹⁰ Whilst Pollitt had spoken defiantly in July 1934 that '[t]here can never be any question of free speech for Mosley, there can never be any toleration for Fascism',¹¹¹ the idea was to break the anti-CPGB rhetoric of Labour leaders who repeatedly accused Communists of encouraging disorder. The object was to further extend the united front to the rank and file of the Labour Party and trade unions, and ultimately attract disaffected leftists into the Communist Party or, at the very least, into one of the CPGB's satellite organisations.

IV

In order to assist this strategy and consolidate non-Communist involvement in anti-fascist activities, a meeting was held on 25 July 1934 at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square in London. This meeting resulted in the launch of the 'Co-ordinating Committee for Anti-Fascist Activities'. The meeting, attended by some 50 people,

appears to have been instigated by the British Anti-War Movement with John Strachey delivering the keynote speech. Strachey drew specific attention to the anti-fascist work of the British Anti-War Movement which had, only three days earlier, organised a large anti-fascist rally in Victoria Park in East London, distinguished by the contribution of the Artists' International which had prepared effigies of fascist dictators, much to the delight of the crowds.¹¹² Strachey identified a spontaneous movement against fascism emerging in diverse industries and trade unions in London, from printers, busmen, railway workers, shop assistants through to workers in Spitalfields Market. Strachey argued that this movement needed coherence and that it should direct all its efforts towards breaking down the refusal of the Labour Party, TUC and Co-operative Party to form a united front against fascism. He considered that the ideal way of achieving this was through a massive counter-demonstration against Mosley's proposed rally in Hyde Park, scheduled for 9 September 1934.

Thus, the central task of the Co-ordinating Committee for Anti-Fascist Activities, born essentially as an offshoot from the British Anti-War Movement, was to wreck the Labour Party's refusal to co-operate in united front anti-fascist activity through appeals to various anti-fascist trade union groups, industry-specific groups and disaffected leftists in local Labour Party branches and Co-operative Guilds.¹¹³ Strachey was elected Secretary, with, amongst others, D.N. Pritt (a left-wing lawyer), W. Gallacher (elected CPGB MP for West Fife in 1935), W. Elliot (Men's Co-op Guild), H. Adams (Building Trade Workers) and Professor H. Levy agreeing to serve on the initial Committee. In due course, they were joined by Lord Marley, James Maxton, Fenner Brockway, Ellen Wilkinson, Dorothy Woodman, Harry Pollitt, and Leah Manning (President of the National Union of Teachers).¹¹⁴ Meanwhile, a further spin-off from the British Anti-War Movement targeted youth. Following a national youth congress held in Sheffield on 4 and 5 August 1934, the Youth Front Against Fascism and War was established.

An internal CPGB memorandum dated 13 August reveals how central the Hyde Park counter-demonstration was to the CPGB's strategy of breaking the Labour Party's ban on the united front. It states that the 'whole energy' of the CPGB must be put into preparations for Hyde Park over the next four weeks, the united front with Labour organisations being the 'central task running through all the preparations ... If we are not able to get TU branches, Trades Councils and Labour Parties to participate we shall have failed in our main task'.¹¹⁵ With the CPGB interpreting Olympia as a great success for anti-fascism, the main priority now was to direct popular anti-fascist feeling, aroused in the wake of Olympia, towards victory over the 'reformist' Labour Party. In a somewhat disingenuous letter to the London Labour Party, the Co-ordinating Committee maintained that the workers would inevitably turn out in force against Mosley in Hyde Park if left to their own devices, therefore it had decided to organise and co-ordinate the Hyde Park demonstration in order to safeguard the workers from BUF violence. Clearly the Co-ordinating Committee was trying to convey the impression of responsible behaviour, answering a legitimate call to protect workers from the 'calculated

brutality' of the Blackshirts and ensure that 'peace can be kept on September 9th'. Pointing to the success of Olympia, 'which everyone now admits was the greatest setback which Fascism has had in this country', the Co-ordinating Committee maintained that if 'the co-operation of all London working class organisations is secured, the Fascist Rally can be drowned in a sea of working class activity'. The Co-ordinating Committee also stated that it would press the London trade unions to consider the use of one-day strikes on the days of fascist demonstrations, following the example of workers in Madrid and Paris.¹¹⁶ On 15 August, a copy of this letter was published in the *Daily Worker*.

Predictably, the Labour Party, TUC and Co-operative Party once again rejected the proposals. The official Labour leadership understood the more underhand intentions behind the Hyde Park counter-demonstration and besides, by August 1934 the Labour Party's interest in British fascism had waned as a result of the withdrawal of Rothermere's support for the BUF. In a circular from the National Council of Labour (formerly the National Joint Council), signed by Walter Citrine and Labour Secretary Arthur Henderson, it was made clear that most of the signatories to the Co-ordinating Committee for Anti-Fascist Activities 'are either known as Communists, or are associated in one form or another with Communist activities'. Unconvinced by the Co-ordinating Committee's stress on orderly conduct, the circular concluded that the Hyde Park proposals would 'inevitably' lead to widespread disorder and this type of activity 'would merely be playing the game of those who desire to see a restriction, if not the abolition of the rights of public meeting and freedom of speech'.¹¹⁷

Yet it would be unwise to decry Labour's passive response to the Hyde Park proposals as indicative of aloof complacency towards British fascism. In early 1934, the National Council of Labour forwarded a serious plan of action to counter fascism, concerned that youth was being led astray by the generous publicity provided by Rothermere. First, a national educative campaign was planned, which would involve meetings, demonstrations, supply of notes for speakers, leaflet and pamphlet distribution. Through explicit reference to the disastrous effects of fascism in other countries, these leaflets and pamphlets would continually expose BUF policy and its anti-working-class character.¹¹⁸ Second, alongside this educative campaign, an investigation was to be pursued into the legal status of fascist organisations, and whether new legislation should be enacted in order to safeguard democracy. As part of this campaign, a deputation on behalf of the National Council of Labour visited the Home Secretary, Sir John Gilmour, on 26 June. At the meeting, the dangers of allowing the 'militarisation' of politics were 'impressed' on Gilmour, who responded that the Government was determined not to tolerate disorder and was engaging in a review of existing legislation. The Labour Party also sent out a questionnaire to its local district parties on 12 June 1934 in order to ascertain the nature and extent of BUF activities, relations with other political parties and local press reaction. However, given Rothermere's break with Mosley, the semi-positive response of the Government, the findings of its own questionnaire (which hardly forecast an impending fascist takeover) and the end of economic depression, the

urgency behind Labour's anti-fascist campaign abated. By August 1934 the National Council of Labour was satisfied that public opinion had turned against fascism and that without the support of Rothermere, the BUF was left with 'hollow teeth'. Nevertheless, it still warned the party against complacency¹¹⁹ – the charge that Labour was far too complacent was the typical broadside of Labour's 'United Grunters'.¹²⁰

On the radical left, Communist Party preparations for Hyde Park carried on regardless of Labour's response. These preparations were classified by Special Branch as follows: appeals for support; propaganda in the Party press which had, since 15 August, promoted the Hyde Park counter-demonstration in virtually every issue of the *Daily Worker*; circulation of literature; instructions to groups and members; public meetings; and propaganda from a motor van. It was also reported that from a secret source (possibly Moscow), the Communist Party had received further financial contributions – £2,000 was donated towards financing anti-fascist activity, especially activity connected with 9 September.¹²¹ However, these early arrangements were not going according to plan: news of the proposed protest was met with silence from the mainstream press. A train entering King's Cross Station with the words 'March Against Fascism on September 9' painted on the boiler in large letters failed to attract press coverage, as did the delivery of crates to numerous factories with the same call written on the sides. The CPGB claimed that this press silence was intentional, orchestrated by the National Press Association, an organisation of the large newspaper proprietors which controlled all newspaper trains and which refused to allow these trains to be used by the *Daily Worker*. Frustrated by the paucity of media coverage, the CPGB worked relentlessly to overcome the purported 'press ban' through an innovative publicity campaign, which appears to have been largely directed by an ad hoc group based around the CPGB's propaganda chief, Bert Williams.¹²²

On 3 September the front page of the *Daily Express* reported that three anti-fascists interrupted a BBC outside broadcast and succeeded in calling on London workers to demonstrate against fascism on 9 September. This was followed by further attempted broadcasts from what the *Daily Mirror* termed 'microphone bandits' – one such 'bandit' having seized the microphone at Romano's restaurant in the Strand where dance music was being broadcast on a powerful new transmitter. Thousands of anti-fascist leaflets were dropped onto a busy Oxford Street from the roof of Selfridges on 3 September and leaflets were also thrown down from buses and from other buildings over the course of the next six days. These included leaflets issued by the London District Committee of the CPGB, the Young Communist League and the Co-ordinating Committee for Anti-Fascist Activities.¹²³ As many as 1 million leaflets may have been distributed.¹²⁴ Walls and pavements were also chalked, but audacious anti-fascists also dared to elect Nelson's Column as the place to paint a call for 'workers to do their duty' in large letters. Other ostentatious deeds included the unrolling of a banner from the roof of the BBC's Broadcasting House at midday on 7 September, which remained in position for over half an hour before it was removed. Additional banners were unfurled from the top of the Law Courts and Transport House.¹²⁵ Not surprisingly, these various publicity-seeking

measures, with their emphasis on the unorthodox and sensational, attracted requisite press coverage and ultimately proved very effective in publicising the Hyde Park counter-demonstration.

On the day, as with Olympia, contingents of anti-fascists assembled at various points in London. Some 1,300 gathered at the junction of Edgware Road and Marylebone Place to form the North and North-West London contingent. Various local Communist Party branches were represented here, but there was also support from the Portsmouth Workers' Movement, the Leicester and Sheffield Youth Anti-War Council, the YCL, ILP, Transport and General Workers' Union, the National Amalgamated Furnishing Trades Association, local branches of the NUWM, the Artists' International and the King's Cross Co-operative Society. An estimated 1,000 met at Stepney Green and were led by Harry Pollitt. Some 50 banners were carried by this East London contingent which represented local CPGB branches and various trade union bodies, such as the Hackney Electricians. Special Branch noted this East London contingent seemed well supported by the local Jewish community. The CPGB had made a special appeal to East London Jews, widely distributing a leaflet in Yiddish which implored Jews in England to 'take a lesson from what has happened in Germany and not wait'¹²⁶ (further evidence that ahead of the BUF's turn towards hard-line anti-Semitism the CPGB had recruited Jewish elements in the East End). Elsewhere, the West, South-West and South-East London contingents, numbering approximately 2,700, gathered near Exhibition Road. Once again various local CPGB, NUWM branches and trade unions were represented. Finally, a group of some 300 anti-fascists from the Printers', Busmen's and Railwaymen's Anti-Fascist Groups met separately at Lambeth Palace Road. Thus, according to Special Branch estimates, approximately 5,000 organised anti-fascists marched to Hyde Park.¹²⁷ Again acting in open defiance of the Labour Party leadership, these marchers were also joined by 30 sections of the Labour Party's League of Youth.¹²⁸

On arrival at Hyde Park, the four processions of anti-fascists met a vast crowd, estimated from a very conservative 60,000 by Special Branch through to between 100,000 and 150,000 according to various newspapers. The size of this crowd (100 anti-fascists for every fascist had been the target) indicated the extent to which popular anti-fascist feeling amongst Londoners had been mobilised by the events at Olympia and by the Communist Party's unorthodox publicity campaign. Explicit instructions on the anti-fascist side were issued to avoid violence and make for the four anti-fascist platforms, but large numbers uninterested in the speakers left the anti-fascist platforms and congregated around the fascists as they marched into Hyde Park behind Mosley. There was much booing, heckling and ridicule from anti-fascists but there was no serious disorder despite fears that the propaganda which had appeared in the *Daily Worker* and in the various leaflets was 'violently phrased' and could be interpreted as incitement to violence.¹²⁹ The Co-ordinating Committee had sent out recommendations that the emphasis should be on restraint: well-timed and well-informed questions and interjections rather than shouting down BUF speakers as soon as they spoke. According to a Special Branch

report, the ‘demeanour of the majority of the persons’ in this crowd ‘was distinctly hostile to the fascist speakers’, yet the report qualifies this point with the observation that ‘many thousands were present merely out of curiosity or in anticipation of seeing a clash between the two factions, or with police’. This was apparent ‘by the little interest taken in the objects of the proceedings and the manner in which large numbers rushed to the scene of any unusual activity’.¹³⁰ Notwithstanding these observations, the CPGB evidently succeeded in mobilising unprecedented numbers of Londoners to Hyde Park, leading Harry Pollitt to later describe the Hyde Park anti-fascist demonstration as ‘the biggest breakthrough ever made against the ban on the United Front imposed by the Labour leaders’.¹³¹

Unsurprisingly the Labour Party minimised its importance. The next day the *Daily Herald* declared that ‘the Mosley fiasco was mainly owing to splendid police organisation and the good sense of London workers, who observed the direction of the TUC and took no part in the counter-demonstration’. Angered by this version of events, one Communist organiser recalls that the *Daily Herald* was publicly burnt in Brighton by local Communists and the ashes returned to the *Daily Herald* offices in a large envelope.¹³²

V

The scale of the anti-fascist mobilisation in Hyde Park was the opportunity to launch a national anti-fascist organisation, and indeed, membership forms for the (British) Anti-War and Anti-Fascist Movement were distributed on the day. One idea had been to hold a major follow-up meeting at the Royal Albert Hall where a national organisation could be launched with the CPGB ‘right in the middle’, ‘giving the drive’. Another plan, proposed by Strachey, had been to secure the election of militant delegates to an all-London conference on fascism that had been called by the London Labour Party and London Trades Council on 22 September 1934. Strachey thought that this might offer the platform from which a national anti-fascist movement could be launched, but Communists were deemed ineligible to attend. In any case, Strachey later warned against this initiative, insisting that if a national organisation were launched before the rank and file of the labour movement fully understood the nature of fascism, then a divide between informed anti-fascists and misinformed sections of the working class would result. The CPGB protested that the Labour Party ‘would have us believe that Mosleyism is Fascism, that at its best it is a foreign importation entirely unsuited to the British climate, an importation that will wither away if it is ignored’.¹³³ For Strachey and the CPGB, this perspective was naive, indifferent to fascism being more than a case of Mosley and the Blackshirts. According to the Communist Party’s ‘class’ analysis, fascism was the ‘open dictatorship of capital’ – its source was the capitalist system and in particular, finance capital. By late 1934, the CPGB’s theoretical position had hardened to an ‘ultra-leftist’ critique: finance capital backed the National Government as the main weapon of ‘fascisation’. The capitalist class used the existing state to enforce anti-working-class legislation (for example, Incitement to Disaffection Bill), but also

backed Mosley as a ‘subsidiary weapon’ to be used against the working class if the force of the National Government proved insufficient in time of crisis. Thus fascism had a ‘twofold’ character and this character implied that the struggle against fascism could not rely on the state or ‘bourgeois democracy’ to defend the working class. For Strachey and the CPGB, the Labour Party’s analysis which encouraged workers to trust ‘bourgeois democracy’ and which subsequently pointed to the weakness of Mosley in Hyde Park in order to reject the need for special anti-fascist activities, was seriously flawed:

It is essential to make clear to the workers this twofold character of the Fascist offensive, at once through the official State machine and through the open Fascist forces [...] The understanding of this necessarily destroys the ‘democratic’ illusion, the illusion of the possibility of the legal bourgeois democratic opposition to Fascism.¹³⁴

Accordingly, the only way to oppose and defeat fascism was through proletarian revolution. Strachey therefore insisted that following Hyde Park, the anti-fascist struggle should concentrate on liberating workers from the reformist chains of the Labour Party’s narrow interpretation of fascism, inculcating revolutionary zeal and broadening the appeal of the Communist Party. This demanded ‘untiring and unceasing work in every Trade Union branch, in every Labour Party, and in every Co-operative Guild’.¹³⁵ However, this did not imply an end to ‘mass action’ because ‘by far the most effective method of converting workers to our point of view is by example rather than precept’. Strachey concluded that this strategy would encourage the development of anti-fascist organisations at local level, leaving the Co-ordinating Committee at the centre to ‘maintain contact and give general direction and cohesion to all these organisations as they come into being’.¹³⁶

Thus, the continuation of the Co-ordinating Committee for Anti-Fascist Activities relied on the sustained growth of militant anti-fascist movements ‘from below’, but without local-level organisations providing the necessary momentum, the Co-ordinating Committee faced stagnation over the long term. The success of the CPGB’s strategy therefore required incisive penetration of the labour movement, but Labour leaders quickly took measures to resist Communist influence. In October 1934 the TUC issued a Black Circular which pressured trade unions to exclude militants from office and forbade trades councils from accepting militants as delegates – only 18 out of 381 trade councils failed to execute this circular. Already in December 1934, it was noted in the CPGB’s monthly that there had been ‘a noticeable slowness to penetrate into working-class organisations’.¹³⁷ Yet for Strachey and the CPGB, the success of the ‘anti-fascist front’ could only be made certain by fighting ‘fascism’ on all its fronts, and this required broad mobilisation of rank-and-file Labour supporters not only against the BUF but also against the ‘fascisation’ of the National Government, and ultimately the ‘reformism’ of the Labour Party and TUC leadership. Yet the CPGB’s analysis of fascism ran counter to core ideology of the Labour Party, which committed the Party to democratic socialism and

interpreted the state as a neutral entity. Conversion to the Communist position, which essentially saw anti-fascism in terms of proletarian revolution, would have meant Labourites repudiating both the leadership and the entire consensual basis of Labour ideology. This was an unlikely prospect and although ideological differences between the militant left and the moderate left did not prevent local co-operation in the common fight against Mosley's fascism, it effectively blocked co-operation with the militant left in what the CPGB perceived as a revolutionary struggle against a wider 'fascism'.

Even though revolutionary mobilisation within working-class organisations proved unattainable, further activities against the British Union of Fascists continued in the wake of Hyde Park as the Communist Party also looked to convert the rank and file of the labour movement through its example. Towards the end of September 1934 the Communist Party orchestrated opposition to a rally held by Mosley at Manchester's Belle Vue Gardens. Calling on workers to follow the lead of London, an estimated 5,000 anti-fascists responded and opposed around 1,000 Blackshirts. Once again the *Daily Worker* declared that Mosley had been swamped by a 'sea of working class activity', drawing explicit, albeit forced parallels with the much larger mobilisation in Hyde Park. Acting inconsistently with the CPGB's official line, which stressed police indulgence towards fascism, Maurice Levine, a prominent local Jewish Communist, had called on the Chief Constable of Manchester to ban the BUF's rally.¹³⁸ Presumably this approach followed indications that the Chief Constable was hostile to the BUF given that on previous occasions Manchester police had removed Blackshirt stewards from the Free Trade Hall meeting in March 1933 and had imposed a curfew on a BUF meeting in October 1933.¹³⁹ What Levine's approach to the authorities reveals is that ideological concerns did not prevent pragmatism and variation in anti-fascist strategy at a local level, even for an organisation like the Communist Party which was so closely attached to its ideology. More in keeping with Hyde Park, however, was the absence of serious disorder at Belle Vue, and this also appears to have been the case at a large BUF meeting held in Plymouth Market Place on 11 October. However, violent disorder had followed Mosley's visit to Worthing on 9 October despite the CPGB's attempts to minimise physical confrontations at large BUF meetings.¹⁴⁰

In October 1934 the Co-ordinating Committee for Anti-Fascist Activities received notification that Mosley intended to hold a further meeting at the Royal Albert Hall. It called a counter-demonstration in Hyde Park but in the event only managed to attract a few thousand at most. Support came from the ILP, various branches of the CPGB, YCL, Labour League of Youth, as well as industry-based anti-fascist groups.¹⁴¹ Joe Jacobs, in his autobiographical account of East End militancy and the rise of fascism, concedes that 'I don't remember why this meeting was not opposed in any real strength'.¹⁴² Perhaps Jacobs was embarrassed that complacency, born from the perceived success of Hyde Park, had set in. Indeed, discussions about launching a new anti-fascist newspaper in November 1934, inspired by the Co-ordinating Committee, came to nothing. The planned editor, CPGB reporter Claud Cockburn, complained of being overworked and Strachey became

increasingly frustrated with what he perceived as lacklustre management of the CPGB's anti-fascist policy. Both Pollitt and Palme Dutt informed Strachey that it was his responsibility to overcome these administrative problems but Strachey replied that he was no 'leader', and instead of providing the Co-ordinating Committee with much-needed direction, Strachey took up the invitation to give a lecture tour in the United States and left Britain in December 1934, not returning until mid-April 1935.¹⁴³ Without Strachey to provide stewardship, the Co-ordinating Committee lost momentum (although it did manage to organise relatively small demonstrations against a meeting held by Mosley at the Royal Albert Hall in March 1935).¹⁴⁴

According to the picture gleaned from Home Office sources, the scale of anti-fascist activity declined noticeably during 1935. As Cullen has noted, for the first part of 1935 the CPGB concentrated its efforts on anti-Jubilee activities.¹⁴⁵ A contributory factor behind this decline in anti-fascist activity and the CPGB's corresponding shift in agitation focus, was the departure of Strachey who, prior to his visit to the United States, was insisting that the 'most urgent task of Communism' was 'to save human civilisation from Fascism'.¹⁴⁶ A further factor was the failure of the CPGB to develop an offensive struggle against 'fascism' on the widest possible front. Anti-fascist counter-demonstrations in 1934 had been primarily defensive, triggered by announced BUF activities. Mobilisations had been particularly significant when a high-profile visit by Mosley was given public notice, sparking the creation of local united front anti-fascist committees. However, once a counter-demonstration had been organised, activity often lapsed. There were exceptions, such as Manchester, which was noted for frequent low-level street confrontations between fascists and anti-fascists, but as a general rule the problem, noted in the CPGB's monthly, was apathy and lack of direction. It was, as one comrade remarked, a case of 'now that Mosley has gone there seems to be nothing for us to do'.¹⁴⁷ For the CPGB, this inactivity was the direct result of the prevailing 'reformist' position which defined fascism solely in terms of the fight against Mosley and the BUF.

This 'reformist' mode of anti-fascist opposition also meant that levels of anti-fascist activity mirrored levels of BUF activity, and so as the frequency of BUF activity decreased in 1935, so too did anti-fascism. The adverse publicity that the BUF attracted at Olympia resulting from anti-fascist exposure, combined with the loss of Rothermere's support, helped undermine the BUF's membership base which had fallen to a mere 5,000 by October 1935.¹⁴⁸ The number of BUF meetings recorded in the Home Office files, tabulated by Cullen, correspondingly fell from 89 in 1934 to 53 in 1935.¹⁴⁹ Yet whilst this decline in the BUF's fortunes did reduce general levels of activity, the BUF remained active in certain regional pockets, such as Lancashire, where from November 1934 to April 1935 a cotton campaign was launched. This was promptly countered by the CPGB which held a series of public meetings and distributed some 10,000 pamphlets entitled 'Mosley and Lancashire'. Mosley continued to make the occasional high-profile visit to provincial centres, such as Leicester in April 1935. In May 1935 he was forced to close a meeting at Newcastle City Hall when faced with continual heckling from the audience which made it impossible for him to continue. Nonetheless, fascist

activities generally fell during 1935 as a consequence of the BUF's contraction and subsequent preoccupation with internal reorganisation. Where meetings were held, often they were low-profile and went unopposed. As Gerald Anderson put it, '[i]n general, the BUF efforts were increasingly ignored or passively tolerated, and Mosley could point to few Fascist converts'.¹⁵⁰ Tellingly, the BUF failed to contest the 1935 general election and it was not until the autumn before the BUF was fully reactivated in London, where the decisive factor, as Richard Thurlow identified, was 'the discovery that anti-semitism was a good recruiting tactic in the East End'.¹⁵¹

VI

Looking back over the early development of anti-fascism in the 1930s, it is clear that in sharp contrast to the 1920s, anti-fascist activities did engage significant numbers of people. Where in the 1920s a narrow circle of precocious anti-fascists countered Britain's first fascist organisations, in the early 1930s thousands of people opposed Mosley's British Union of Fascists. Unlike the 1920s, anti-fascism had wider resonance, it had extended into provincial areas as early as 1933 and grew to national significance. It is worth reiterating that the rise of Nazism, the early growth phase of the BUF, and the willingness of the militant left to take the lead in organising opposition through locally based united fronts were the key factors behind this wider development of anti-fascism. Local activities raised anti-fascist consciousness and on a number of occasions encouraged large-scale participation. The refusal of the Labour Party leadership to support direct confrontations with the BUF did not prevent anti-fascist co-operation at local levels, but without the organisational resources of the Labour Party to support the 'united front', anti-fascism was deprived of broad structural cohesion.

The development of anti-fascism in the early 1930s was therefore loosely defined and variegated. In 1934 the Communist-sponsored Co-ordinating Committee for Anti-Fascist Activities attempted to impose coherence from the 'centre', but following the Hyde Park counter-demonstration it lost momentum, and as the CPGB's revolutionary struggle to proselytise the workers against a wider 'fascism' met with little tangible success, the activities of the Co-ordinating Committee petered out. Nevertheless, the *modus operandi* of disruptive tactics employed by anti-fascist activists did succeed both in restricting the BUF's operations and limiting its capacity to disseminate fascist ideology. Most importantly, these tactics invited the BUF to deploy violence against opponents and this served to discredit fascism, denying the British Union of Fascists political and social respectability at a most critical stage in its formative development. At the same time, Labour's official refusal to engage in militant anti-fascism reinforced the strength and stability of the prevailing liberal-democratic consensus, hence restricting political space for the BUF. So ironically, although Labour's anti-fascist policy was attacked by the CPGB, it actually worked in tandem. Labour's commitment to political moderation and liberalism helped marginalise and delegitimise both the violence and ideology of British fascism. Isolated, and with very little room to manoeuvre, the BUF had no real alternative but to descend into the sewers of anti-Semitism.

Notes

- 1 See The National Archives (TNA) CAB 24/162/153, 433 and 577.
- 2 For coverage of early responses to domestic and continental fascism, see K. Hodgson, *Fighting Fascism: The British Left and the Rise of Fascism 1919–39*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010.
- 3 See TNA KV 3/57: Activities of British Fascist Organisations in the UK (excluding the BUF), ‘The British Fascisti Movement’.
- 4 TNA KV3/57: ‘British Fascisti Enrolment Oath’.
- 5 See R. Bosworth, ‘The British Press, the Conservatives, and Mussolini, 1920–34’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 1970, vol. 5, 163–81; and R. Palme Dutt, ‘Notes of the Month’, *Labour Monthly*, vol. 7, 7 July 1925, 390.
- 6 This has been suggested by J. Hope in a footnote to ‘Fascism and the State in Britain: The Case of the British Fascists, 1923–31’, *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 1993, vol. 39, no. 3, 367–80.
- 7 TNA CAB 30/69/220: New Scotland Yard Special Branch Reports on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom, Report no. 241, 31 January 1924.
- 8 The National Unemployed Workers’ Committee was a Communist ancillary organisation. Formed in 1921, it became the National Unemployed Workers’ Movement in 1929.
- 9 TNA CAB 30/69/220: New Scotland Yard Special Branch Reports on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom, Report no. 241, 31 January 1924.
- 10 See TNA CAB 30/69/220. New Scotland Yard Special Branch Reports on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom, Report no. 270, 4 September 1924.
- 11 *The Clear Light*, June 1924.
- 12 ‘National Union for Combating Fascismo: A Statement of Objects’, *The Clear Light*, November 1924.
- 13 See ‘Our Position as Revolutionary Socialists’, *The Clear Light*, February 1925.
- 14 ‘National Union for Combating Fascismo: A Statement of Objects’.
- 15 ‘The Fascisti’, *The Clear Light*, February 1924.
- 16 See ‘Ours Fascistically and How’, *The Clear Light*, April–May 1925.
- 17 The Plebs League originated at Ruskin College, Oxford. Its function was to popularise Marxist education within the labour movement. See The Plebs League, *Fascism: Its History and Significance*, London: Plebs, 1924, p. 34.
- 18 TNA KV 3/57: ‘The British Fascist Movement’.
- 19 William Joyce joined the British Fascisti in December 1923. On Joyce’s involvement with the British Fascisti, see C. Holmes, *Searching for Lord Haw-Haw: The Political Lives of William Joyce*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2016.
- 20 R. Palme Dutt, ‘Notes of the Month’, *Labour Monthly*, 7 July 1925, 395.
- 21 T. Bell, *British Communist Party: A Short History*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1937, pp. 107–8.
- 22 Described as such by Herbert Morrison in a letter to the Prime Minister, see *Daily Herald*, 10 November 1925.
- 23 For a fuller discussion, see R.C. Maguire, “‘The Fascists ... are ... to be depended upon’”. The British Government, Fascists and Strike-breaking during 1925 and 1926’, in N. Copey and D. Renton (eds), *British Fascism, the Labour Movement and the State*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pp. 6–26.
- 24 According to BF sources many fascists did co-operate with the OMS as ‘British Fascists’ during the General Strike, see TNA HO 144/19069/34–5.
- 25 TNA HO 144/13864/31–2.
- 26 TNA HO 144/13864/31–2.
- 27 TNA HO 144/13864/31–2, 43–4 and 47–9.
- 28 TNA HO 144/13864/81–5.
- 29 F.G. Portsmouth in *The Fascist Gazette*, 8 November 1926.
- 30 TNA HO 144/19069/85, 9, 19 and 81.

- 31 *The Daily Herald*, 21 October 1925.
- 32 *The Daily Herald*, 7 and 11 November 1925.
- 33 TNA HO 144/16069/211–12. Also see *Labour Monthly*, vol. 7, 7 July 1925, 385.
- 34 R. Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1972, p. 38.
- 35 See R. Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, London: Macmillan, 1981, pp. 355–7.
- 36 On the New Party, see M. Worley, *Oswald Mosley and the New Party*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- 37 John Strachey had resigned from the Parliamentary Labour Party in 1931. He was later to return to the Labour Party and was adopted Labour candidate for Dundee in 1943 and served in the Labour administration of 1945–51.
- 38 J. Strachey, *The Menace of Fascism*, New York: Covici Friede, 1933, p. 157.
- 39 See N. Copsey, ‘Opposition to the New Party: An Incipient Anti-Fascism or a Defence Against “Mosleyitis”?’ *Contemporary British History*, 2009, vol. 23, no. 4, 461–75.
- 40 *The Blackshirt*, 18 March 1933, no. 3.
- 41 Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, p. 353.
- 42 See N. Copsey, ‘Communists and the Inter-War Anti-Fascist Struggle in the United States and Britain’, *Labour History Review*, 2011, vol. 76, 184–206.
- 43 Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, p. 358.
- 44 On the CPGB in the 1920s, see M. Worley, *Class Against Class: The Communist Party in Britain Between the Wars*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2002.
- 45 *The Blackshirt*, 18 March 1933.
- 46 *The Blackshirt*, 17 April 1933.
- 47 H. Pelling, *The British Communist Party: A Historical Profile*, London: Adam and Charles Black, 1975, p.77.
- 48 See P. Corthorn, *In Shadow of the Dictators: The British Left in the 1930s*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2006, p. 28.
- 49 Pelling, *The British Communist Party*, p. 76.
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- 102 See *Anti-Fascist Special* (1934) p. 3.
- 103 See *Fight*, July 1934 and August 1934. On meetings of the New World Fellowship during 1934, see TNA HO 144/20143/363, 364, 366, 372 and 382.
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- 120 *The Labour Organiser*, August 1934, no. 158.
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- 149 See S. Cullen, 'Political Violence: The Case of the British Union of Fascists', 249. These figures appear to be largely derived from meetings held in the Metropolitan Police District. As Cullen notes, provincial meetings were only recorded if there was serious disorder or if they were on a large scale.
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