

## To be Jews among socialists...

*Jewish Socialist* magazine is very much a product of the 1980s – a period when a whole range of new and radical initiatives burst upon the Anglo-Jewish scene, representing diverse issues and interests, breaking free from the stifling constraints of the “official” Jewish community and its power structures. But the group that launched the magazine has a longer history. David Rosenberg tells the story.

The first manifesto of the Jewish Socialists’ Group (JSG) appeared in *Tribune* in March 1974. At that time it was a small group primarily based in Manchester made up of individuals long active in general political struggles throughout the Communist Party and the Labour Party. They were increasingly concerned with two nagging

issues which, in the short term at least, seemed to demand a collective response through a Jewish organisation.

These comrades had begun meeting in October 1973. The date is not accidental. It was immediately after the Yom Kippur War. Although most did not describe themselves as “Zionist”, they were very concerned about positions increasingly taken by the Left on the Israeli-Arab conflict which seemed to express an uncritical pan-Arab nationalism that completely disregarded the national rights of the Israeli people and a secure future for Israeli Jews. This trend had, they perceived, become particularly blatant during the ‘73 War.

The other issue concerning the Jewish socialists was much closer to home – the rise of fascist groups. They sensed that the fascists were in the ascendancy and understood that, alongside their anti-black

racism, antisemitism would feature prominently in the spread of fascist ideas and in their public activities. They sought urgently to alert and mobilise both the Left and the Jewish community against this incipient danger.

The group was very active in its first few years, propagandising, educating, and mobilising at street level. Events seemed to bear out their concern on both these central issues. By the late 1970s the National Front had a membership that had grown to 20,000-strong and was taking to the streets at every opportunity. The JSG was very active in the Anti-Nazi League formed in 1977 and, especially in the north of England at that time, anti-fascist mobilisations often featured JSG speakers. While the group was uniting with others to make a “no platform for fascists” policy effective in every sphere, this same tactic was being transposed in a

## ...and socialists among Jews

clumsy, opportunist and threatening way to the more abstract ideological debate around the Middle East conflict. This had disastrous consequences, on college campuses where many Jewish student societies found themselves banned or facing severe restrictions on their activities. JSG members on campus consistently opposed the banning of Jewish student societies, while arguing against

Jewish chauvinist positions for a just peace settlement. The group was also busy combating a tendency among much of the Left of complacency about antisemitism for fear of compromising the purity of their anti-Zionist position.

In those first few years the group grew and changed considerably. It recruited a number of students who later formed the base of the London branch.



The wider world was changing too at dramatic pace. Thatcher swept to power in Britain playing the racist card; Begin’s Likud came to power in Israel, and the established institutions of the Jewish community swung further right. The events of the late 1970s brought a good deal of political heart searching on the Left, particularly in response to activists within minority movements around issues of identity, community and strategies of autonomy.

Appropriate to these times, the group welcomed a number of new members who identified with a specifically Jewish socialist autonomous political tradition – the Bundist tradition rooted in Eastern Europe at the turn of the century, but a tradition that stressed the here and now, politically and geographically; committed to Jewish rights and cultural autonomy in the diaspora; rejecting the centrality of Israel

## Five of the best



When *Jewish Socialist* came into existence, five years ago, it promised that it would at last give a voice to radical Jews. We have kept that promise: the Jewish Feminist conference 1987, Ruach 1988, Israeli socialists, army refusniks and peace activists, anti-racist Jews ... have all found a voice in *Jewish Socialist*.

But we have achieved much more than that. We have opened debates that could not have happened elsewhere – on the political use of Holocaust analogies; on the future of the non-refusenik majority of Soviet Jews. And we have broken taboos, questioning religious coercion as in the practice of circumcision; querying and rejecting Zionist political priorities; examining attitudes to AIDS and homophobia in the Jewish

community; looking at the personal experience and politics of mixed relationships.

We haven’t sought to open these debates and touch these hot potatoes out of a *dafke* principle – wanting to be contrary or sensationalist – but as part of a tradition that has historically challenged bourgeois and reactionary orthodoxies and moralising within our community. We have consciously recognised our roots in the Jewish socialist tradition and have published articles by Bundist activists, Cable Street veterans, anti-Nazi workers writing about struggles here, in Germany and in Eastern Europe in the 1930s. Through their reminiscences, the Jewish socialists who have written for us have bridged their experiences and struggles of yesterday with ours today.

*Jewish Socialist* has always looked towards at least two constituencies – primarily the socialist movement and the Jewish community, providing a unique voice in both. The last five years have thrown up various issues that have tested and in some cases drawn apparently sharp dividing lines between these two communities, such as the GLC experience, the poisonous injection of Farrakhanism into Black-Jewish relations and anti-racist politics, the heated controversy over *Perdition*. *Jewish Socialist* was the only Jewish journal to interview Ken Livingstone during his period as GLC leader. The magazine challenged Farrakhanism on socialist and anti-racist grounds rather than Jewish chauvinist ones, and, on *Perdition*, what other journal

could feature substantial contributions from both Jim Allen, the play’s author, and David Cesarani, one of the play’s main detractors, as well as providing its own independent critical comment on the claims made both by Zionists and anti-Zionists?

*Jewish Socialist* has provided a platform not just to engage with the Left but also with the “leaders” of the Jewish community. From the cover-up of antisemitic attacks, through their cynical and totalitarian manipulations over the *Jewish Quarterly* affair, to this very issue where we reveal what is being done in the name of “community security”, our magazine has courageously exposed and challenged those who would find it easier to claim to speak for us all if

*Jewish Socialist* did not exist.

The British Jewish community is just starting to emerge from a very insular period when it seemed only events in Britain, the USA or Israel were worthy of note. Suddenly Jews in Eastern Europe are gaining recognition, yet, since issue 2 of *Jewish Socialist*, there have been in-depth articles on contemporary Jewish life in the USSR, Poland and Hungary. We are committed to internationalism in both Jewish and socialist spheres. We have also covered developments in France, Germany and South Africa.

Who knows what surprises the next five years will hold? Whatever they are, you can be sure that *Jewish Socialist* will be there with its distinctive eye and voice.



in Jewish life and thereby fundamentally at odds with traditional and neo-Zionist views of Jewish history and destiny.

Although the group contained and continues to reflect a variety of Jewish and socialist traditions among its membership – and this is a major source of strength – the Bundist input was fundamental. It ensured that the group recognising that its horizons stretched beyond the most pressing immediate issues of the Israel/Palestine conflict and anti-fascism, and the short-term strategies they demanded, to a recognition of a wider set of underlying issues about the relationship of minorities to the socialist movement and the type of socialism we strive for, and about politics and power within the Jewish community, locally, nationally and internationally.

The group's founders had not conceived of the group as having such a broad and long-term role. Most of them found it difficult to adapt to changing conceptions of that role and the practical policies that flowed from them, particularly in terms of mounting a political challenge *within* the Jewish community. After the group's 1981 conference, when differences became clearly crystallised, a number of the founding members, led by the

late Aubrey Lewis, left. He later formed the short-lived "Jewish Socialist Action" before becoming active and locally prominent in Poale Zion – the Labour Zionist movement.

The broadening political horizons of the group were reflected in its new manifesto, adopted in 1980, amended in 1981 and substantially revised again in 1988.

Through the 1980s the group became firmly committed to and rooted in a diasporist perspective, engaging in a very practical and effective way with international issues, such as the Israel/Palestine conflict, but recognising that we were Jews in Britain "here to stay"; that here is the arena in which our activity is based and can be effective. So in 1982/83, during the Lebanon War when we took our first steps in pioneering Jewish/PLO dialogue in Britain, we did so not as an arm of any Israeli or Palestinian movement directly involved in the conflict, but in our own right as diaspora Jews who refused to accept that Israel was acting in our name and who sought to challenge the efforts of the Jewish establishment in Britain to corral Jews into identifying with "Israel – right or wrong".

From its well-founded diasporist perspective the group was well placed to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the accession to power of an outward and forward looking Labour-controlled Greater London Council. It gave the JSG two years' funding (1984-86) for a London-based "Jewish Cultural and Anti-Racist Project" (JCARP). The project carried out a great deal of work promoting Yiddish culture (classes, talks, cultural events), and organised a series of meetings aimed primarily at the Jewish community where it drew on the community's anti-racist traditions to present joint Jewish/Black platforms

addressing contemporary issues of racism, fascism and antisemitism and their connections to each other.

The work of JCARP brought us into direct conflict with a Jewish establishment clinging tenaciously to its orthodoxies of political conservatism, religious authority and assumed Zionism, and we felt the full weight of its power and repression which manifested itself in widespread public and private smear campaigns, denial of access to communal facilities, encouragement of physical harassment by far-right Jewish elements at our public meetings and use of bullying tactics against others in the community who either came close to us or treated us as equals. A clear example was when the Board of Deputies forced the resignation of the editor of the "independent" *Jewish Quarterly* after he printed an article by a JSG member about responses to current racism and antisemitism in Britain.

All these events, however, tended to confirm and clarify the group's emergent analysis of the Jewish community and its relation to wider political issues. It began openly to challenge widely-accepted portrayals of the community as homogeneous and secure, drawn by its more affluent, conservative and powerful elements, and showed that the community was in fact very diverse. There were competing interests in the community but the opposition of interests was regulated through a hierarchical power structure with an economic and political base.

The group argued that beneath the veneer of security and affluence many parts of the community found themselves in increasingly vulnerable economic sectors, while in Britain's general political life more space was opening up for right-wing and authoritarian positions. Racism was gaining

strength and the JSG was aware of the historical role of antisemitism in European societies and the possibility of a renewed upsurge. Le Pen's incipient movement in France and the persistence of a high level of antisemitic incidents here seemed to be a taste of what the not-too-distant future might hold.

Against a widespread communal "common sense" that the community could look only to itself and to Israel for its security, the JSG argued that the security of Jews here was bound up with that of other ethnic minorities and threatened groups, and ultimately with the struggle for socialism. It recognised that, while the right-wing image and practices of the Jewish establishment were alienating, marginalising and excluding many radical Jews, the dangers threatened us *all* and the group was not prepared to leave the response in the hands of bodies who historically have shown themselves

incapable of defending any but their own narrow interests.

An important spin-off from the group's GLC-funded activities was that they gave the group the confidence to begin publishing its undiluted thoughts in its own magazine. They also gave the group the confidence to move outwards and build, rather than just support, campaigns together with others. Almost every radical initiative that has emerged in Britain's Jewish community in recent years has had a greater or lesser JSG input – for example, Jews Against the Clause, Friends of Yesh Gvul, Jewish Women Support the Palestinians, Anne Frank exhibition events in Sheffield and Nottingham, a range of Yiddish cultural events, and so on. Through experience, activities and self-education we have gained a clear idea of where we come from and a vision of where we are going.

In the 1980s the first practical steps were taken to bind the

destiny of the Jewish people with the destiny of socialism. That unity in its various forms survived many decades until it was shattered and almost obliterated by Nazism and Stalinism and its remnants ground underfoot by triumphalist and chauvinist Zionism and narrow and elitist neo-Conservatism. In the 1990s, particularly younger and more radical Jews are looking beyond the range of these reactionary and discredited ideologies to a politics that gives meaning to their identity, that legitimates their real concerns, that links them to other peoples' and other groups' concerns, that encourages them to participate actively in shaping their destiny, that looks forward to the future with confidence. The Jewish Socialists' Group offers that politics, that perspective and that opportunity.



**On Jewish Socialist's 5th birthday we remember with love  
Joe Garman  
lifelong socialist and anti-fascist, founder member of the Jewish Socialists' Group. We miss his warmth and humour but his inspiration and example live on from family, friends and comrades**

**Jewish Socialist reader? Yes.**

**Jewish Socialists' Group member? No.**

**Celebrate the 5th anniversary of Jewish Socialist by joining the Jewish Socialists' Group and help to translate ideas into action.**

**Write to the Membership Secretary, JSG, BM 3725, London WC1N 3XX.**

**Congratulations and thanks to all who have served on the editorial committee over the last five glorious years!**

**JSG member**

**Message from a socialist shulgoer**

*If there are approximately 330,000 Jews in Britain and about 123,000 belong to a synagogue and 49,100 males and 28,000 females formally belong to the United Synagogue and 6,000 males and an unknown number of females belong to the Federation and 18,000 males and 10,500 females belong to Reform and Liberal synagogues and the ultra-orthodox absent themselves from the Board of Deputies (save for a single observer) for fear of "corruption" by the Progressives (and there are possibly 6,000 Lubavitch, 2,100 Sephardim (represented), 3,400 Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregation members (unrepresented), and an unknown number of members of independent shiblekh and no Federation women, and only the few female United Synagogue members in their own right may vote for delegates and no canvassing is permitted for United Synagogue (US) elections and no hustings are held on policy in Federation or United Synagogues and not more than 10% of members participate in US synagogal elections — how representative or democratic is the Board of Deputies of British Jews, given its concentration in synagogal communities?*