

Bradford 12Introduction

The verdict of not-guilty in the Bradford 12 trial was an important victory. It was a victory in the struggle of black people against the forces of the state who attempt to criminalise those who fight back against their oppression. Concretely, the jury decided in this case that it is not a crime to fight back, to defend yourself against racist attacks: Self Defence is No Offence.

The victory was particularly important because the campaign to defend the Bradford 12 was the only national campaign built after the 1981 uprisings. There were numerous local campaigns to defend those arrested in or after the uprisings - Brixton, Liverpool, Manchester etc - and some were more successful than others. For example, the campaign in Southall which defended many charged by the police, won many of the cases but was not built nationally.

Important criticisms have been made of the campaign, the most influential being that made by Race Today (RT) in their paper of Aug/Sept 1982. Some people have summed up the campaign as being a failure and attribute the victory to the legal defence alone (Big Flame - BF). Although we know that there were serious weaknesses in the campaign which we must sum up and learn from, we think that on balance the campaign was positive and contributed to the victory. The demonstrations in Leeds and Bradford, the mass picket on the first day of the trial and the attendance in the public gallery all had a direct effect in the courtroom and the mass work done around the country has a more long term effect.

1. Background

The attempt by the state to make criminals of the Bradford 12 has to be seen in the context of the history of the oppression of national minorities in this country and the history of their resistance and fightback, and the particular history of those active in the United Black Youth League (UBYL):

- a. The development during the 1970s of the resistance of the Asian youth as a specific force, sometimes organised across national boundaries e.g. Asian Youth Movement, Southall Youth Movement, sometimes within national groups e.g. Bangladeshi youth organisations. RT has a good account of this and it also comes out in the trial of the Bradford 12 in the accounts of the 12 of their political development: 1976 murder of Gurdip Singh Chaggar in Southall; 1979 police attack on Southall; Bengali Youth Movement in East End of London etc. Defence against racist attacks was a central issue in the development of this movement but it also involved defence against police (Southall) and fight against deportations and divided families (Anwar Ditta etc.)
- b. There had been a mainly separate but parallel development among Afro-Caribbean people: Black Power movement in 1960's; defence campaigns in London and elsewhere e.g. George Lindo. This had led to the movement round the New Cross Massacre and the Black People's Day of Action.
- c. The uprisings of 1981 were a culmination and watershed in the resistance of black people which brought together different strands. For example, St Pauls in Bristol and Brixton involved mainly Afro-Caribbeans and the defence of black territory, and the immediate target of the uprisings was the police. In other areas, the threat of attack by fascists and racists was also involved - Southall, Luton etc. In many areas white people also took part. In some areas police actually spread rumours of fascist attack, probably to deflect any attack from themselves, and in others fascists were involved.

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d. The UBYL grew out of the AYM in Bradford. It consciously attempted to unite Asian and Afro-Caribbean youth, rejected any use of state funds and took an anti-imperialist stand particularly in unity with the struggle of the Irish people.

2. Political line of the campaign

The case against the 12 was based on the making of a crate of petrol bombs. Some of the 12 were accused of making them and others of being involved in planning etc. The state upped the charges by labelling petrol bombs as explosives and drew in those not directly involved in making them by using conspiracy charges.

At the beginning of the campaign it was unclear what line of legal defence would be taken by the defendants. The campaign took up the general slogan of 'Black Community on Trial'. When the trial began, during the week of jury selection, it became clear that the legal defence would be self defence. From that time the campaign took up the slogan of 'Self Defence is No Offence,' as the main slogan.

The essence of the criticism by RT and others is that the line of Self Defence should have been taken up from the beginning of the campaign and that without this the campaign inevitably failed. We consider that this view ignores the complex realities of the situation at the beginning of the campaign. It would have been much clearer to have had a situation where the 12 were united among themselves and with members of the UBYL not arrested, who could have led a campaign which united the legal and political defence on the question of self defence i.e. defendants, campaign and lawyers united on the basic line. However the real situation was far from this and it is more useful to look at the real situation that existed then and what was correct and incorrect in the way the campaign handled the contradictions. The most important factors which complicated the situation were:

1. The unity of the Bradford 12 was maintained in court at the time of the trial. But at the time of the arrests and right up to the trial there were serious divisions among them, particularly on the line of legal defence which was not finally settled till just before the trial started.
2. The state used skilful tactics to keep the defendants isolated from each other and stop them working with the campaign i.e. did what it could to increase divisions. These included holding the 12 for several months and not granting bail. When bail was granted, giving harsh political conditions which effectively prevented the 12 taking part in the campaign for their own defence.
3. The members of the UBYL not arrested could not give a strong enough lead to overcome these divisions. There were serious political differences and probably opportunist elements which prevented a strong united committee growing in Bradford itself.
4. The result of all this was a complex situation in which we did not have a situation where defendants and the campaign could work closely together. In this situation it would have been opportunist for the campaign to go against what the lawyers were saying - that an open self defence line would jeopardise the legal defence. (SWP did precisely this at one stage in the campaign.)

In this situation 'Black Community on Trial' was the best slogan to have put forward. The line of self defence should have been implicit in the campaign material without self defence being used explicitly or used as a slogan at this time. When the legal defence was settled the slogan of self defence could have been brought forward as the main slogan without any contradiction with what had been said previously.

This is what did in fact happen in some areas of the campaign where the campaign was relatively strong and based among black people with a good understanding of the basic issues. 'Black Community on Trial' was used to raise the issue of self defence without being explicit about what the twelve had or hadn't done (e.g. Birmingham, Sheffield.) However it is clear that the national campaign was not clear enough about this and allowed ambiguity to come into its material so that 'Conspiracy' and 'Frame Up' became the main slogans and many people understood that the 12 had been framed up and had had nothing to do with petrol bombs. In particular on the conspiracy line:

1. It was argued that the state was using conspiracy charges because they were an attack on the UBYL. It was often argued that the conspiracy charges increased possible sentences which is simply factually incorrect. It was of course correct that the state 'made a mountain out of a molehill' because of the past history of the UBYL particularly its leading members. But this was done as much by using explosive charges, instead of for example offensive weapons, and the conspiracy charges were brought in to implicate those of the 12 who clearly had had no direct involvement in the making of the petrol bombs. The stress on conspiracy seemed to back up the line that the 12 had been framed up because of their political activity.

2. Secondly, the conspiracy theme was used in an opportunist way to draw parallels with the Shrewsbury pickets particularly in an attempt to get trade union support. This actually fudged the real question which was the right of national minorities to self defence. The demands and issues were watered down in an attempt to get support from the 'working class movement'.

To sum up, we think there were weaknesses in the campaign but that this was not a result of not taking up the Self Defence slogan at the beginning of the campaign. They resulted from looseness and opportunism within the campaign and it was quite possible to use the slogan 'Black Community on Trial' implying a line of self defence as was in fact done in some areas.

The RT criticism gets some important details wrong. But more important it does not deal with the complex reality that actually existed and seems to assume that unless we have exactly the right conditions we should not take part in the defence. We think that it is important to be able to learn the lessons from the Bradford 12 campaign. The situation that has developed round the Welsh Republican trial where the campaign is openly split should show us that the Bradford 12 campaign was not unique, that the state is able to use divisions and the importance for us to learn how to handle contradictions in a principled but flexible way.

3.

After the trial, Tariq Ali wrote: "There are four fundamental reasons for the present victory. The backbone of them is the political campaign outside the court:

1. the campaign
2. the defence counsel
3. the jury
4. the internal unity of the defendants.

"Without the campaign it is doubtful whether we would have had the defence counsel that we did. Without the defence counsel we would not have had the jury that we did. Without the jury that we had, we would not have been acquitted. We would have been buried under the ever-growing mountain of injustice against black people."

We think this should be our basic position. It is difficult to measure the effects of the campaign exactly. But clearly black barristers wanted to be associated with the case and this was at least partly because of the campaign.

Narayan was a clear example of this. They knew it was going to be an important trial. Demonstrations, pickets and attendance in the public gallery had an effect on the jury and on the defendants. The press, TV and radio had an almost total boycott on any news about the trial, so it was only the campaign that could spread information.

However the effect of the campaign goes beyond the victory in the courtroom. In some areas, work round the Bradford 12 has led to further work and strengthened black organisation. The most important example is probably the setting up of the PWA which is directly a result of work round the Bradford 12 campaign. In general in Birmingham work round the campaign helped build the Birmingham Youth Movement and led to a situation where black activists felt they could organise independently no longer relying on the IWA. In Sheffield work round the campaign has led to local work round racist attacks and the setting up of an AYM. The influence on campaigns like the Newham 8 is obvious.

4. The Legal Defence

The legal defence did a good job in the courtroom and we should study this in more detail. However the main points are:

1. The importance of jury selection. The whole first week of the trial was taken up by jury selection and was crucial to the outcome of the trial. The legal defence was beginning to expose the basic methods of jury selection which ensured in this case that defendants from Bradford would never be tried by a jury of people from their own communities. To avoid this whole issue coming out into the open, the judge made a compromise in order to get more black people onto the jury. The campaign rightly took up the question of the jury and slogans of 'Rigged Jury' and 'Fixed Jury' are still to be seen in the centre of Leeds. It is worth noting the importance of the question of the jury in recent black trials, particularly that in Bristol and Thornton Heath. In the US the right to be tried by a jury of your 'peers' has been a central question in the trials of black activists there.
2. The legal defence did a good job of questioning police methods and credibility.
3. They showed up the police line on racist attacks and their failure to defend black people.
4. They justified self defence.
5. They brought out the political nature of the trial. The state's strategy was essentially to portray the 12 as 'hoodlums' etc and it was the defence that had to bring out the record of political activity to expose the political nature of the trial.
6. Tariq Ali defended himself which was a useful tactic in this kind of trial. He did not have to observe all the conventions which a barrister would have had to.
7. Two important points have come up since the end of the trial. 1. the attempt by the state to overturn the verdict of the trial not as it affects the 12 but so that it cannot be used as a precedent in the future. 2. Since the Bradford 12 case the state has stopped defendants being able to make statements from the dock without being cross-questioned. This was a basic democratic right which has now been taken away.

There were some general problems with the legal defence:

- a. Although the solicitors, particularly RB, were committed to working with the campaign, there was no consistent cooperation. There is a need for consistency between the legal and political campaign which was not well worked

out in this campaign. Without good relations between the campaign and the defendants it was not possible to establish the relationship where the defendants and the campaign instructed the solicitors.

b. Behind the scenes there was a sharp struggle between the politics of the defendants and of at least one of the barristers. This reflects the struggle within the national minority communities and is important for us to understand. Thus SK was using the trial for his own political reasons as chairman of SCOPO and did a lot of campaigning work among local Asian people in Leeds and Bradford. The witnesses he called in court were also linked with his political constituency - middle class councillors etc. Privately he had a great deal to say against the defendants and the campaign. But the important point for us to understand is that even with such sharp contradictions, unity on the basic issues was possible and the role played by SK in the trial, of taking up the question of racist attacks and the police's failure to protect black people, was crucial.

c. There were political problems in the defence in the court. In order to put up the legal argument that making petrol bombs was an 'honest and instinctive reaction' to the threat of fascist attack, some barristers painted a picture of poor Asian victims of fascist attacks, who panicked in the face of attack. This went against what the UBYL stood for.

d. The legal defence objected to some of the material put out by the campaign. In broadsheets and leaflets the campaign tried to publicise the question of racist attacks and the need for self defence and took up the question of organised attacks on Southall in the summer of 1981. But the campaign also linked this with the general uprisings in Brixton and Toxteth and it was this material that the legal defence objected to. However the campaign's material dealt with the uprisings as general background rather than making specific points related to the defendants and ignored the legal defence on this.

e. People in the campaign (with a few exceptions) had not seen the depositions etc and many were thrown by 'voluntary statements' etc when they came to court.

5. Contradictions within the UBYL, among the 12 defendants and between them and people in the campaign made it difficult to handle questions like line of defence or problems with the solicitors. Political contradictions in Bradford - CH/UBYL/AYM/RT - led to the collapse of the support committee there which was obviously a serious weakness. Immediately after the arrests, 800 people in Bradford had gathered at a meeting called to defend the Bradford 12. This support was lost because of the problems with the committee in Bradford. At one point SWP even controlled the support committee there. This question could do with serious analysis and summing up but we are not in a position to be able to do this at present.

However in spite of these contradictions, the 12 defendants and the campaign maintained unity in the court. We should not underestimate the role of the state in building on the divisions.

It is also a fact that the state managed to smash the UBYL that was a new organisation only formed a few months before the arrests. It may be that the UBYL would not have survived in that form. The political victory was more important than the particular organisation.

6. National campaign

Because of the problems in Bradford, the main leadership for setting up a national campaign came from individual young Asian activists in London. A national committee was set up with representatives from different support committees and political organisations which met initially in London and later roved around the country. This was extremely loose politically and organisation-

ally. Especially while national meetings were held in London, it is true to say that there were enough black people in the leadership to stop the worst forms of opportunism of the 'left'. However they were mainly progressive individuals and activists and no black organisation was involved. We do not consider that it is true to say that there was strong black leadership in the campaign. The Birmingham Youth Movement was exceptional in providing consistent support from black people. The lack of involvement of the defendants themselves was also a serious weakness.

The lack of a strong political lead meant that the national campaign was patchy. The lack of a committee in Bradford was a serious weakness. There were groups in Leeds, Manchester, Liverpool, Sheffield, Birmingham, Leicester, Nottingham, N. London, S. London, E. London. Bristol CARL did some work round the campaign. Some of these committees only lasted a short time - Leicester, Nottingham, Liverpool and Manchester.

Apart from UBYL, AYM and BYM, some other black organisations were involved in different degrees. In Birmingham - KWA, BWA and IWA. In London BWA and other organisations were involved in the local work. Various welfare and religious bodies also gave support. Apart from the support from the black community, some sections of white people supported the campaign, mainly anti-racists, women and students. There were some international support, notably from Ireland, India and the US. There was limited support from the trade union movement consisting mainly of resolutions and sometimes donations but little active support on demonstrations and pickets.

We do not consider that the Bradford 12 could have provided the framework for a permanent national anti-racist campaign and consider it idealist to have expected this to come out of the campaign. On this basis we consider it wrong to see it as a failure that the campaign did not continue after the victory in the court. The campaign consisted of individuals and organisations that had come together on this one specific issue and there was no basis for the campaign providing permanent leadership to the anti-racist struggle.

7. There was some opportunism within the campaign and also from a variety of left groups who did not necessarily work within the campaign but saw the demonstrations and pickets as opportunities to sell papers etc. Essentially this kind of opportunism used the Bradford 12 campaign to promote their own organisation. Important examples within the campaign were:

1. Within the Bradford committee SWP took over at some points. They reversed national committee decisions. They put their own line regardless of decisions of the campaign. At one point SWP opposed holding a national demonstration in April on the grounds that the time was not ripe: the white working class was not ready to support the Bradford 12 therefore the campaign should not hold a demonstration. They also claimed to speak on behalf of the IWA on this.

2. Another example of opportunism was the first bulletin put out just before the trial by the national committee, which didn't mention black people in its first draft and even when this was corrected concentrated on the attack from a Tory government and tried to make parallels with the Shrewsbury pickets.

3. Before the Self Defence line was taken up, the vagueness of national leaflets and concentration on the conspiracy aspect meant that many people understood that the 12 had been framed up.

8. The lack of good organisation also led to serious problems:

1. National meetings were unreliable, late, decisions often reversed etc.

2. The enormous work load round the trial was not well organised - pickets, public gallery, office, leaflets, bulletins, mass work, office, press etc.

In spite of this the presence in the court was effective and broadsheets and bulletins useful. But even taking out one aspect of the work like the press, it is clear that the work could have been organised better: national and international contacts, lists of addresses etc.

3. Many people in Leeds got fed up because of the lack of organisation round the trial i.e. meetings did not happen on time, went on too long when they did happen, division of work was unclear, there was little routine etc. Some people who were prepared to work were not used well and drifted away. The main loss was local work in Leeds.

9. Role of the League

Shortly after the beginning of the campaign, League members in London, Leeds and Birmingham began taking part in the campaign. Following this we took up the campaign nationally and worked round it in a consistent way. CS recognised the importance of the issue from the start. We need to sum up the work done in different areas and to make this summary more complete. Some lessons are clear:

1. Politically and ideologically the League recognised the importance of the campaign and comrades worked in it consistently.
2. London, Leeds and Birmingham worked in the campaign nationally but our main emphasis was on building support locally.
3. We could have handled better the confusion over the line of the campaign both internally and in the paper. CS got sidetracked into a long series on conspiracy laws.
4. On the whole League comrades won respect for their hard work and principled way of working in the campaign even if we did not take up the campaign quickly in all areas. We were the only left organisation to work in the campaign consistently (apart from some individuals from BF and Revolutionary Gay Men's Caucus). In several areas League comrades played a major role in support committees - Birmingham, N London, E London. During the trial League comrades worked hard and well.
5. There were weaknesses in the work some due to lack of experience or lack of clarity about the line. But on the whole we avoided the worst forms of opportunism. We concentrated on 'Black Community on Trial'. We supported the line and decisions of the campaign.
6. As a result the League won respect and influence. We should not measure how successful we were in terms of numbers of members recruited. Organisationally probably the most important gain has been the setting up of the PWA under ML leadership. However we made contacts at many different levels. We should also not underestimate the importance of being able to work in a non-chauvinist and non-sectarian way. We consider the RCL showed itself to be able to do this in the Bradford 12 campaign and that given the history of the British 'left' this is something we should see as important and be able to learn from.
7. The Sub-Committee should have given a stronger and quicker lead both politically and organisationally. This weakness is part of the general problems within the League.
8. Our conclusion is that the decision to take part nationally in the campaign was basically a correct assessment of the political importance of the campaign. And that the League mainly played a positive role although there were many lessons to be learned from the weaknesses and errors made.

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10. 'Black Community on Trial' and 'Self Defence is No Offence' were two powerful slogans when linked together and the acquittal of the Bradford 12 was not just victory for them but for all black people.

The slogan 'Self Defence is No Offence' dealt with the question of racist attacks which are a threat to black people all over the country. This line was implicit in the slogan 'Black Community on Trial' and it is in this sense that the victory was one for all black people. In spite of the sharp contradictions between the different forces within the black community the unity of the community was maintained in the face of the attack from the state. These different forces ranged from careerist barristers, black youth, traditional cultural and religious organisations, Asian workers' organisations and black individuals and activists. The unity of the black community was the main force mobilised in the defence of the Bradford 12.

The support of sections of white people was important but secondary. Support came from anti-racists, women and students mainly. Attempts to build trade union support were largely unsuccessful.

The acquittal was an important victory that cannot be attributed to the legal defence alone, and which has important effects outside the courtroom. There will be important battles to be fought in the future, in fact there are already in the Colin Roach and the Newham 8 campaign, and we will be better able to take these up if we learn the lessons from the Bradford 12 campaign.