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- immediate action against racist attacks
- physical defence of victims of racist abuse
- fighting racism on the streets and not in conferences
- extending the struggle into the unions to isolate the racists.

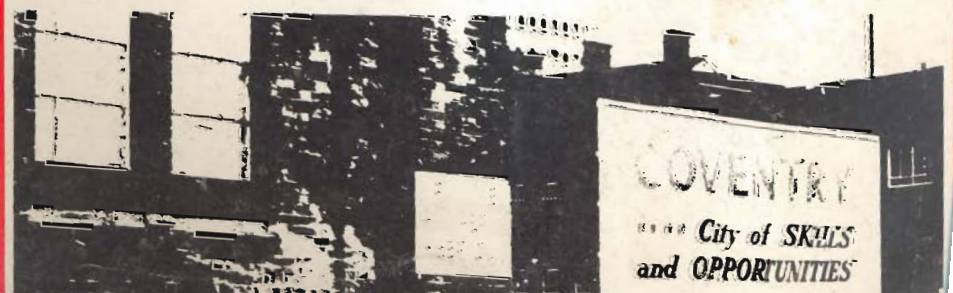
COVWAR

20p

Coventry Workers Against Racism



GHOST TOWN



Revolutionary Communist Party

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SLUMP CITY

Coventry used to be known as a town of jobs and prosperity. Now all that remains of the good old days is a sign by the rail lines:

WELCOME TO COVENTRY – CITY
OF SKILLS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Now more than 6000 young people are

on the dole: they have few skills and even fewer opportunities to develop them.

The collapse of Coventry's industry means poverty and misery for thousands of workers. The most barbaric feature of the crisis in Coventry is the steady growth of racist violence.

A series of attacks on the Asian community has created an atmosphere of tension and fear. Blacks have been assaulted, stabbed and killed on the streets while pedestrians looked the other way. On 18 April 1981, Satnam Singh Gill was killed in full view of shoppers in the busy city precinct. In June, Dr Dharry was attacked in his car and stabbed to death. Racist murder is only the most dramatic form of the violence. Many Asian families live under virtual siege against systematic racist attacks. Even places of worship are targets of racist thugs. The Sikh temple was smashed up in February and petrol bombed in May.

As long as violence was only directed against the Asian community, the Coventry establishment maintained a diplomatic silence. Tory politicians, the police and the Labour Party-dominated council all ignored the trend towards anti-black pogroms. Then anger erupted among Asian youth.



In May a demonstration held to protest against racist attacks was attacked by a group of racists and fighting broke out. When the police moved in to defend the racist thugs violent clashes took place between the police and the marchers. By the evening the police had arrested 30 people — predictably most of them were black.

The May riot woke up the Coventry establishment to the fact that there was a problem. The immediate response was to step up the police patrols in Asian areas, the 'stop and search' harassment of Asian youth and general surveillance. Police repression was complemented by a cynical attempt to deny the extent of racist violence. According to the local police and the *Coventry Evening Telegraph* the fault lay with left-wing agitators like Coventry Workers Against Racism (COVWAR) who argued that the violence of the racists should be met with the violence of the working class. 'Extremists' were to blame: 'left to go

about its business in the normal way Coventry would still be a racially harmonious city' (*Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 12 June 1981).

The leaders of the local labour movement joined in the denunciations of COVWAR's attempts to organise workers' defence against racist attacks. They argued that taking matters into our own hands only exacerbates the problem. The Labour Lord Mayor, Councillor Phil Robinson claimed that 'Coventry has had an excellent race record' (*Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 6 June 1981).

This pamphlet shows just what an 'excellent race record' means. Right from the time they arrived in Coventry in the 'fifties and 'sixties West Indians and Asians have faced racial harassment and discrimination. But so long as the

immigrant community accepted this state of affairs Tory and Labour politicians could portray Coventry as a model of racial harmony.

The present wave of racist attacks is not simply due to rising unemployment as many on the left claim. The recession has only exacerbated tensions that have long been accepted as part of everyday life. The labour movement has an 'excellent record' of silence and acquiescence in the oppression of immigrants enforced by the British government. This pamphlet goes to the racist roots of the summer riots in Coventry and through outlining the objectives of COVWAR we call on workers to begin the fight for their class interests by getting rid of the racists in their own ranks.

An excellent race record?

The golden age of racial harmony in Coventry is a myth. Black people were always accorded the status of second class citizens. This inferior position stemmed from the role assigned to immigrants by British imperialism. Britain's plunder of its colonies ensured that the majority of the people in Africa, Asia and the West Indies lived in utter destitution. For imperialism poverty had its purpose: black people could be

used as a reserve army of labour, as a pool of workers that could be shifted around the world when and where necessary. In the 'fifties Britain's expanding economy created a demand for immigrant workers. However, when blacks arrived in Coventry they found out that their presence was tolerated only as a 'stop-gap' measure. Their role was straightforward — they were expected to work in the low paid and

unpleasant jobs which white workers were no longer prepared to take on.

The Coventry establishment did not even pretend to provide decent housing and social facilities for immigrant workers. Booming Coventry faced a housing shortage and immigrants were treated as unwelcome temporary guests who had no claim on council housing. Black workers were forced into rented slums; overcrowding in decaying dwellings became the norm. An investigation by the *Economist Intelligence Unit* revealed that 54 per cent of Coventry's immigrants lived in single-room accommodation in their year of arrival (cited in *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 16 July 1963).

Coventry council absolved itself of any responsibility for the appalling housing conditions of the immigrant community. Indeed the council blamed the blacks for the housing conditions

that were imposed on them. The racist myth of black people turning respectable areas into slums is the product of this period. When black community organisations wrote to the town clerk to complain of the 'adverse publicity directed against our community with regard to overcrowding' (*Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 5 November 1963) their memorandum was duly filed and ignored. The council continued to blame overcrowding on the immigrant workers and also suggested that they were a health risk to the rest of the community.

The smears about 'overcrowding' and 'health hazard' had important political consequences. They legitimised racial discrimination and helped isolate immigrant workers. Immigrants were defined as the problem, and, increasingly, immigration controls were advanced as the solution.

Foreigners need not apply

In the 'fifties Coventry was transformed into the boom city of Britain. War damage was rapidly repaired and engineering and other industries expanded. Between the early 'fifties and the mid 'sixties the number of jobs expanded by 50 000. The new skilled jobs were snapped up by white workers. The old

unskilled jobs left vacant were filled by workers from surrounding areas, then by Irish workers and finally by immigrants from Asia.

But despite the chronic labour shortage black people still had difficulty getting jobs in the Coventry of the 'fifties. Black employment was restricted

to unskilled jobs in industry and the service sector. Informal colour bars prevented black workers from obtaining skilled jobs and prospects for promotion were slim.

The employers institutionalised discrimination in the labour market. In 1955 Coventry Trades Council noted that discrimination was openly practised at the Employment Exchange: 'coloured workers... had been asked to obtain a certificate from potential employers signifying their willingness to employ coloured people' (*TGWU Coventry district committee minutes*, March 1955). Discrimination was not restricted to the Employment Exchange. Coventry Corporation did not employ any black workers on the buses despite the fact that the buses were always undermanned. In 1955 it was reported that the buses were short of 72 drivers and 70 conductors. But it took a seven-year struggle before the Corporation hired its first black bus driver.

Discrimination was also prevalent inside the workplace. In most plants a clear division existed between white skilled and black unskilled workers. At Alfred Herberts, the largest tool factory in Britain, a formal code restricted the grade of work that immigrant workers could perform. One black shop steward denounced the company policy that 'non-European labour should not be promoted to grades higher than those they now occupy' (*Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 21 October 1961). Management responded by denying the existence of the colour bar and argued that it had no intention of changing its employment policy. Discrimination at work has persisted to the present day in engineering. The colour bar was not restricted to

housing and jobs. It pervaded all aspects of life in Coventry, from working men's clubs to police harassment. Superficial racial harmony was built on deep foundations of discrimination and the isolation of the immigrant community.

Committee for City's Coloured People Proposed

THE formation of a committee to represent the interests of coloured people in Coventry and to help, guide and advise them, is suggested by the General Purposes Committee of Coventry Borough Labour Party in a letter to the Lord Mayor, Alderman H. H. K. Winslow.

The letter asks the Lord Mayor to convene an inaugural meeting with the specific purpose of setting up a representative committee. It is suggested that those represented should be the churches, the Indian Workers' Association, the Coventry Trades Council, the Federation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Workers, and the Coventry Africa Circle, and that 12 councillors representing St. Michael's, Poleshill, and Godiva wards—where most of the coloured people live—should also be asked to attend.

No Sign of Trouble

The letter says the General Purposes Committee has been giving very serious consideration to the recent disturbances involving coloured and white people in other parts of the country. It points out that there are between 4,000 and 5,000 coloured people in the city, and says that, although there has been little or no evidence of trouble between coloured and white citizens in Coventry, there is always the possibility that feelings might be aggravated by disturbances elsewhere.

Apart from this, the letter adds, it would be in the interests of the community as a whole if the coloured community had a committee.

Dismay at Riots

Meeting last night, the executive committee of the party passed a motion expressing dismay at the recent riots and strongly deprecating the actions of all people

whose conduct was responsible for the outbreaks. The resolution affirmed belief in the inalienable rights of all citizens in this country to follow their legitimate occupations and pleasures in a peaceful manner without the fear of assault or insult, due to their racial, or colour, or religious beliefs. Copies of the resolution are to be sent to the Prime Minister, Mr. Harold Macmillan, and to the Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Hugh Gaitskell.

ARMY'S NEW ANTI-TANK GUN

THE new guided anti-tank weapon which can be controlled by one man and is on show at the Farnborough Air Display has been named the Vigilant, announce the makers, Vickers, Armstrongs.

Guided by an optical line of sight command system, an infantryman, who needs no special training, steers the missile by a small thumb-operated control stick.

The Vigilant, the company claims, is the first portable one-man anti-tank weapon to be exhibited publicly.

Fibre Output Down

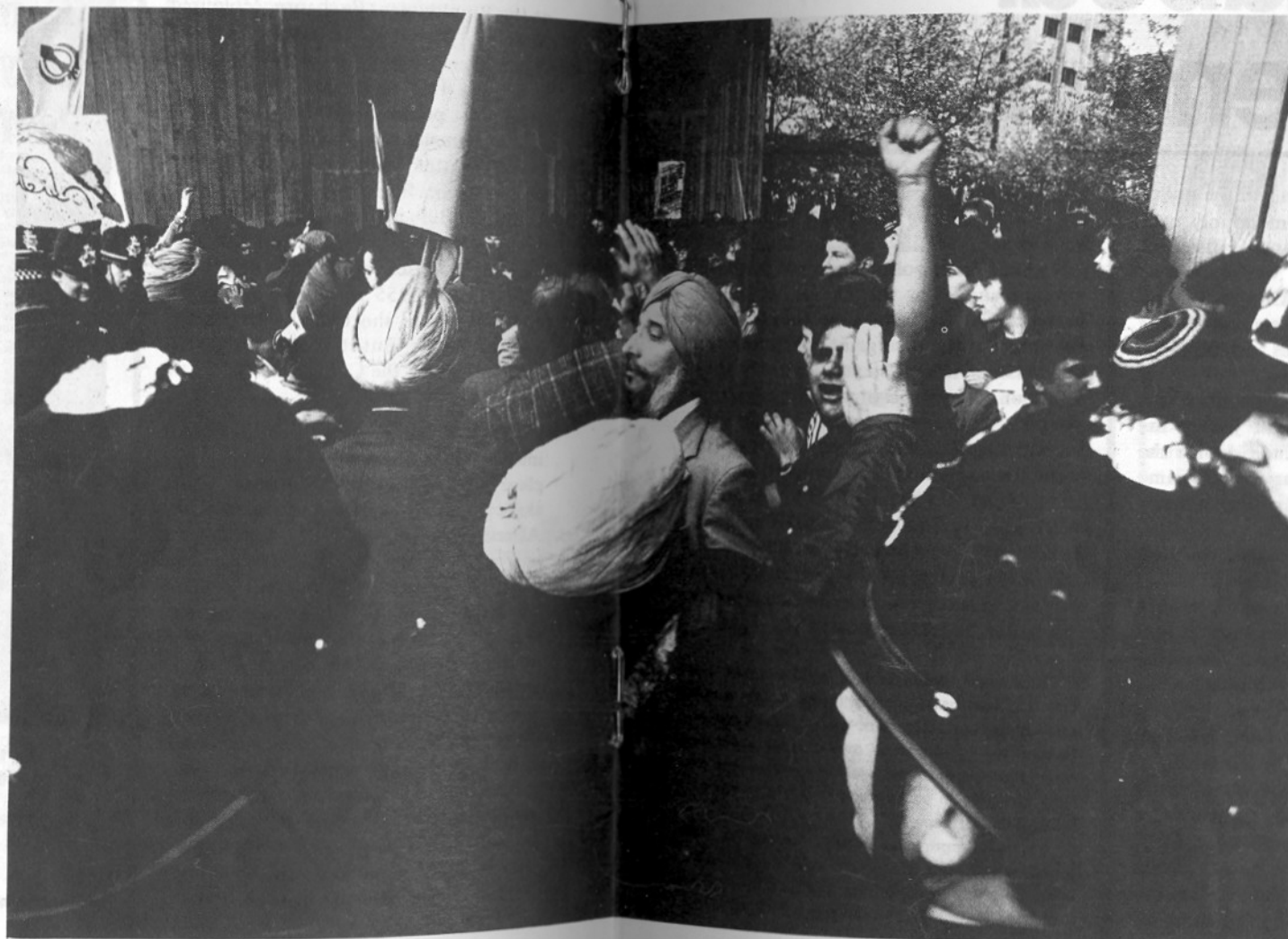
Output of man-made fibres in July was 24 per cent less than in July last year, says the Board of Trade Journal today.

After the 1959 riots, Labour swings into action — not to fight racism, but to control 'coloured people'.

review of the Revolutionary Communist Party

the next step

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Had enough?

Of the race relations industry, community policing,
non-racist immigration controls and anti-Nazi jamborees?

For too long racism has been ignored by the British working class. *the next step* redresses the balance by exposing racism where it really matters — in the heart of the labour movement. Every month *the next step* provides the arguments necessary for isolating racism in the workers' movement. More than that, it points the way forward — through the activities of the RCP and COVWAR — to building the anti-racist struggle in Britain.

JMB Harris

What about the labour movement?

The council, the employers and the police did not, however, have a monopoly over racism. One of the striking features of race relations in Coventry was the role of the Labour Party in making racism an acceptable feature of working class life.

The Labour Party has always proclaimed a hatred for racism. But whenever racism reared its ugly head the Labour Party retreated and joined the attack on black people. Indeed with the passing of time the Labour Party became the most vocal exponent of immigration controls.

In 1958 race riots erupted in Nottingham and Notting Hill Gate. Fascists marched into black areas and attacked residents. When black workers fought back they were arrested. The ruling class raised the alarm — black people had to be kept in their place. The Labour Party took the lead in isolating immigrants from the working class. In Coventry it proposed an inquiry and noted that it had been 'giving very serious consideration to the recent disturbances involving coloured and white people in other parts of the country' and was worried about the potential difficulties that the five thousand

coloured people in Coventry might cause' (*Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 5 September 1958).

Labour Party politicians made resounding speeches on the theme of racial harmony. At the same time they pointed the finger at the immigrant community as the cause of the problem: inevitably they went on to campaign for immigration controls. Throughout the 'sixties the Labour Party distinguished itself by its consistent advocacy of immigration controls while it hypocritically proposed legislation against racial discrimination. Labour MP for Coventry Maurice Edelman even attempted to depict controls on immigrants as a true socialist policy in a speech in Coventry in 1968:

'Unlimited immigration is liberalism run mad. . . . It seems to me that if you try to crowd into any given area, more people than can be catered for by the social services, more people than there is housing available, more people than the health service can tolerate, you are asking for trouble.

'It was important while looking at the problem to ensure that those who came to this country could enjoy their rights. This could only be achieved by humanitarian and practical

planning, which was inherent in socialist policy.' (*Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 2 May 1968)

A real socialist would have fought for more housing and better services. Instead Edelman sought to prevent more black workers from coming into Coventry. This type of 'humanitarian' and 'socialist' policy is what has kept the working class

firmly under the control of bosses. In Coventry and elsewhere the Labour Party peddled chauvinist trash under the guise of socialism. That's why so many British workers today look upon black people as foreigners who are not part of the labour movement. The Labour Party bears full responsibility for the racial divide that cuts through the Coventry working class.

Turning a blind eye

'Unity is strength' is one of the elementary principles of trade unionism. Working class unity however does not extend across the racial divide. Although the trade union movement in Coventry has protested against the more overt forms of racial discrimination it has often turned a blind eye to racists in its own ranks and has tolerated the colour bar at the workplace. This ambiguity towards racism is due to the influence of Labour Party politics on the working class. British nationalism is accepted as part of working class culture and foreign workers are seen as competitors for jobs and services, rather than as class allies.

In the 'fifties the unions did speak out against racist practices. In 1955 the Coventry Trades Council protested against discrimination at the Employment Exchange. During the same year it passed a resolution condemning the colour bar at General Wolfe's, a local pub. In June the TGWU 53/353 branch condemned the

discrimination that employers practised against Irish workers (*TGWU monthly minutes*, 11 June 1953).

But trade union protest against instances of well-publicised discrimination was in sharp contrast to its silence on racism at the workplace. Throughout the 'fifties the unions did nothing to help black workers who were prevented from filling the vacancies on the buses. In 1955, when management suggested that black workers should be recruited for the buses it was the unions who raised objections. The local TGWU branch 5/42 went on record to express its opposition to the recruitment of black drivers and conductors. Despite persistent complaints raised by the Indian Workers Association (IWA), the unions refused to budge. The 5/42 branch reacted sharply to the IWA's campaign: the branch chairman complained that the IWA was 'adopting a dictatorial attitude and eventually no doubt would like to rule the whole city'

(*Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 3 November 1958).

Union officials claimed that race was not an issue: the crew shortage on the buses was good for bargaining for better conditions. TGWU Midlands regional secretary Jack Jones (later to become the union's general secretary) tried to reduce the conflict to a simple technical problem: 'The controversy is regretted . . . as I understand it the problem which arises relates only to the method of selection for employment' (*Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 5 November 1958).

The dispute over the colour bar at Alfred Herberts indicated the depth of racism in the workplace. The shop stewards' committee fully supported the restriction on the promotion of black workers. The convenor of the joint stewards' committee stated 'the stewards' committee had adopted this policy on a majority vote in the belief that the people at Alfred Herberts Ltd would resent strongly any extension of coloured labour on to work other than the work they are now doing' (*Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 21 October 1961). The engineering union which organised a large proportion of the black workforce went along with the colour bar. When

the IWA wrote to the Trades Council to oppose discrimination at Alfred Herberts it was ignored.

The Trades Council was prepared to denounce the employers' racism but when it came to discrimination inside the labour movement it remained silent. In 1961 the IWA wrote to the Trades Council asking for support in fighting the colour bar at five working men's clubs in Coventry. The Trades Council vacillated and refused to act: 'The meeting decided that since the IWA could not be regarded strictly as a trade union it was not within their power to act' (*Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 20 October 1961).

During the last twenty years racism inside the labour movement has become less blatant. Shop stewards' committees no longer make public pronouncements on the advisability of keeping black workers out of certain grades of jobs. Union leaders regularly preach sermons on the virtues of a multi-racial society. But only the rhetoric has changed — racism at the workplace prevails: black workers still have the worst paid jobs and are still the first to join the dole queues.



JMB Harris

Fertile soil for fascism

Racism was no stranger to the Coventry labour movement even in the days when there were jobs aplenty. It is not surprising that today, when everybody faces the threat of unemployment, racism should acquire a new momentum. The nationalist politics pursued by the leadership of the labour movement have ensured that black workers are treated with suspicion if not outright contempt.

As we have seen, even the socialist label has been used to justify chauvinist attacks on the black community. The

respectable chauvinism of the labour bureaucracy has created the space for the growth of less respectable fascists. The extreme right draws on the patriotism instilled into the Coventry labour movement to argue for more far-reaching attacks on the black community. The growth of fascist support among working class youth is the outcome of decades of chauvinist ideology propagated by the leadership of the labour movement.

Young workers are not naturally

racists. But young workers brought up on a diet of British nationalism and racial superiority are vulnerable to fascist propaganda. Decades of racial oppression in Coventry have built up the atmosphere in which racial violence can flourish today. Young workers facing a hopeless future vent their anger on a familiar target: not the invisible system of capitalist exploitation

but the very visible black community.

The racist monster that terrorises Asian people in Coventry today is the legitimate offspring of the respectable politicians and labour leaders of the 'fifties and 'sixties. Liberals who recoil when fascist thugs shout 'Kick a Paki for a white Coventry', would do well to recall their silence during the past two decades.

Workers' defence

Today many left-wing anti-racist workers have yet to draw the appropriate conclusions. Rather than organising workers to fight racism, the left looks to the council, the police or the Community Relations Council to give a lead. Some have even demanded that the police behave in a more democratic and anti-racist manner. This hopeless quest for a solution from the state has only led to the fragmentation of the anti-racist forces. The state is a racist institution. Its role is clear — it must enforce the oppression of black people that is inbuilt into the system. All that the council and the CRC do is make racial oppression a bit more palatable.

Coventry Workers Against Racism is dedicated to organising working class defence of the black community. For too long anti-racist organisations have ignored the potential of the working class for fighting racism. And yet the

anti-racist struggle will be won or lost in the working class. Why? Because no matter how influential chauvinism is in the labour movement today — the working class is the only class that has an interest in destroying racism. As long as racists have a hearing in the labour movement, workers will remain divided and oblivious to their real interests. A labour movement that is divided along racial lines will never be able to act as a class against the bosses.

COVWAR does not ask white workers to fight racism as a favour to black people. We appeal to the labour movement to take up the struggle because it is in the interest of the working class. Employers are colour blind — they see only profits and losses. When workers turn against each other the employers can only gain. Workers who tolerate racism are in reality tolerating the

division of their class by a united ruling class.

Racism can be fought and isolated. It remains influential in the labour movement because for decades nobody has bothered to combat the deadly ideology of British nationalism. The employers thrive on patriotism. Every time they prepare an attack on workers they launch an appeal on behalf of British industry or the British national interest. They don't just ask for redundancies and wage cuts — the employers preach the virtue of sacrifice for Britain. The bogey of foreign competitors is a

useful instrument for disciplining the working class.

Thousands of workers in Coventry — at BL, Chrysler/Talbot and elsewhere — now know that the national interest means the degradation of unemployment for them. The comfort of racial superiority, the pride of being British is not much consolation for those relegated to the dole queues. In Coventry, a labour movement inspired by British nationalism and divided along racial lines has helped ensure that the bosses stay on top.

Ideological slavery

Racism means discrimination and harassment for black people. But for white workers it means something worse: it means the paralysis of the labour movement as workers become the spiritual slaves of their bosses. To fight racism is to break the chains that tie workers to their class enemies. In Coventry, COVWAR has begun the struggle to liberate our class from decades of ideological enslavement.

COVWAR stands for organised working class action against racism. Workers must take matters into their own hands and join in the defence of the black community.

Every racist attack must be resisted; every racist thug must be made to pay.

Organising the physical defence of victims of racist harassment is the first necessary step. But workers' defence must be part of an ideological campaign against chauvinist politics in the labour movement. The destruction of the tired, old philosophy of British chauvinism will open the way to a consciousness that will steel workers for the struggles ahead. When workers in Coventry tell their employers that we don't care about British industry or the national interest then their bosses will start running for cover.

Destroy racism and the ruling class will be revealed as an emperor without any clothes.

*Inez Landa
Helen Simons*