

Remembering the 1970s

Terry Fitzpatrick



Mr. Fitzpatrick worked as a builder in the early '70s. He is regarded as the champion of the Bengali community in fighting anti-racism in East London and started the squatting movement around Brick Lane to accommodate people in empty flats. He is still very active in the anti-fascist movement and probably one of the few activists from the 1970s who stayed most constant to that cause. He speaks fluent Sylheti (Bengali) and is a regular contributor to 'Searchlight', a monthly magazine challenging racism and fascism in Britain and around the world.

..... As housing was very difficult to get, I began squatting. At that time there was a very well developed squatting movement in East London, going back to 1968-69. As a result of this, Bangladeshis had begun to squat on their own or with the assistance of well meaning Whites. I quickly sort of gave up full time work. I began squatting in early 1974 and towards the end of 1974, I was spending more and more time along with other people helping to expand the movement as we saw it.

..... You could only register, if you had a family here, so single Bangladeshi men couldn't even register for housing. In order to get their family here, they had to have housing, otherwise the families wouldn't be allowed in. So people were doubling and tripling up, sleeping on people's floors and flats where they shouldn't be. We had no difficulty whatsoever in getting Bangladeshi people to squat. There was always a massive queue. There was always a huge list of people who wanted to break into places. At that time the National Front was organising in Tower Hamlets. Racial attacks did not directly, very often, come about as a result of National Front itself. It was the National Front's influence that created a climate of fear, if you like. One of the things that I remember about the 1970s was these huge violent confrontations on the streets. There was massive battle in Birmingham, one in Wood Green, one in 1977 in Lewisham and the National Front could put a thousand people on the street for a march. They had the policy in 1974 of creating a well organised Nazi machine with which they were going to kick their way to power.

..... I can't think of single National Front member who was ever convicted before the courts, of instigating a racial attack. But what they did was they created an atmosphere, in which "A Paki family moved in there, let's go and kick them out"; "Let's go and smash their windows". So the others, apart from the homeless Bangladeshis, who wanted to squat, the other phenomenon we had was, where Bangladeshis had been given a tenancy, say, in very unpopular estates on the Isle of Dogs. This is totally before Docklands. In Poplar and around Bromley-by-Bow people had just given up their tenancies, saying shit was pushed into their letter box, kids couldn't go to schools, women would have their saris pulled off in the streets. People were just abandoning their tenancies. I have even lost the count of the number of rent books I have taken back to the council and said, "Here is another one gone".

..... in 1976, we found a block of flats just behind the Montefiore Centre, which was called Pelham Buildings. There were 60 habitable flats, and there were about 7 or 8 tenants left. The building was due to come down and it now has been knocked down. We then decided to do a mass occupation on Easter Saturday 1976, with myself, Faroukh Dhondy, four or five Bangladeshi activists, because by this time some of the younger guys started to come into the movement. In space of two years, somebody would hear somebody had broken into a flat in so and so, and he just wanted some advice.

Our people would come round and say, how to change the lock; what's the law if the police turn up; we'd give them a letter saying if anybody turns up that's the phone number of the Law Centre, that's the phone number of Race Today, that's the phone number of the squatters in Aston Street. They would say, OK, and go off and break into it themselves. So they were getting confidence. So on Easter Saturday, we broke into Pelham Buildings, with the first seven or eight families. There were two very long hot summers in '75 and '76. By the end of 1976 we had 300 people in the building. The last tenants moved out and there were more or less 300 Bangladeshis and me. I then moved into Pelham Buildings, and we used the flat opposite my one as the centre or an office. The old guard leadership, who were running the Bangladesh Welfare Association, were the ones who used to go and see the MP and Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), and negotiated this or that. Their type of politics had had its day. But we used it for self defence. We coined all sort of phrases like: "Self defence is no offence" and Mala drew one up: "Blacks pay tax for roof with cracks". These were the slogans and they were catchy things for demonstrations.

..... So we then occupied the council chamber when there was a housing committee meeting going on in 1976. We all assembled in the gardens by Bethnal Green. About 100 people marched up to the Town Hall which was in Bethnal Green then. And we got the council to back off. By 1976, with the National Front at its height, and street violence everywhere, there was little chance really that a Labour controlled council could be seen slinging Bangladeshis and Asians onto the streets. But there was an element within the grass roots Labour Party, which was totally racist and wanted to see the evictions take place. But they never did; we never lost a single squat, between 1974 and 1979 or 1980, when it came to a sort of end. We had now got 1000 people, men, women and children.

..... In January 1976, we formed the Bengali Housing Action Group (BHAG) and everybody was formally brought into that. Pelham Buildings was the last big seizer of all which GLC controlled. Really by the end of 1976, in two years we squatted just about everything that was empty.

..... I let it be known that we were going to barricade Pelham Buildings, and we moved in sand bags, corrugated iron for the defence. If they [GLC] called the police, you can't have the woman and children fighting the police, but it was bluff. We started moving in timber, rolls of barbed wire, lots of bricks, so that we fight. This was still under the Labour government. Don't forget this was just off Brick Lane, and (the) press had started to take a real interest. There were now articles about this.

..... The guy who was Chair of Housing, George Tremlett, he actually said, he admired squatters because they were very enterprising; they hadn't waited to be housed, they gone out and done it for themselves, like fix places up. They just said, "Yeah, anything you like, where do you want to live". And it was agreed. We prepared a list of estates which was acceptable to our members. Everybody squatting a GLC property would receive one offer of accommodation in those estates. We walked out and we were gob-smacked. We never expected it! They just said "You say to us where you want to live and we will give you a flat".

..... The established Bangladeshi leadership had the policy of seeing and meeting the MP, Peter Shore and the police, when for example a family was being kicked out by racists in Poplar. But the younger ones were saying, "No, we have had enough of this.

We are going to fight these people". So what we did in early '76 was, we had a Bengali Housing Action Group.

The Bangladesh Welfare Association formed the first Bengali youth group, the (Bangladesh) Youth Association, which had people like Jalal (Jalal was the founder of Bangladesh Youth Movement not Youth Association) and others-- all the ones that went on to make careers. They were 17 or 18 years old then. We then began to organise vigilante patrols and I was the co-ordinator of it. We used to meet up in Brick Lane. Getting cars, we went patrolling looking for gangs of Whites.

..... So we got everybody lined up and that was actually a massive demonstration. There were a couple of thousand people and we had big photographs of it. We had already made it clear to all the left groups that, if you want to turn up and support, fine, but you are not bringing your own placards. All of a sudden, I saw all the placards going up. There was a distorted photograph of Enoch Powell's face and it was the SWP (they were called the International Socialists then). So I got the stewards and we started taking the placards off the Bangladeshis and throwing them at one side, blatant opportunism! It was Chris Harman, Paul Holborough, the same little crew. Where the police station is in Brick Lane now was then just corrugated iron. They picked the placards up and started handing them out again. We broke the sticks and were throwing them over the tin. Next thing, this guy, Chris Harman, comes running at me waving his arms, trying to hit me. So I went bang [punch] and he was down on the floor, out of it! The next thing the police had jumped on me and arrested me. So I spent the demonstration in Bethnal Green Police Station. But after that the Bangladeshis started to turn on them. There was a row. So they, International Socialist, then walked around holding copies of their magazine, "Socialist Worker". They are really pathetic people.

.....

..... But the Altab Ali demonstration (while we carried a coffin it rained all the time; it rained all the way from Aldgate to Downing Street) that was the one that was organised by ARCAEL (Anti Racist Committee of Asians in East London), which was a short lived organisation which Bengali Housing Action Group was involved in, with a lot of the youth groups and Bangladesh Welfare Association. It was formed in May '76. It came out of the racial attacks, as racial attacks were increasing. But the impetus for this committee came from Bengali Housing Action Group. We saw it as an extension of squatting. OK, it's alright squatting, it's alright running a vigilante patrol and rest of it, but you have got to have a big political statement that people will take notice of. But what happened was the Bangladesh Welfare Association was never happy with that. They were never happy with this mass organisation of thousands of people on the street. Because their line was, 'We are the elders of community, we will go and negotiate and you will be heard', with Peter Shore, the MP or this one or that one or the Commission for Racial Equality, which just came into existence, and which condemned squatting by the way.