Opposition to British Fascism, 1936–45

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The forcible injection of militant anti-Semitism into the BUF's campaign towards the end of 1935 marked a turning point in the fortunes of British fascism and correspondingly heralded a second wave of anti-fascist activity which peaked at the 'Battle of Cable Street' on 4 October 1936. This famous episode should be firmly located in a chronology of anti-fascism which recognises that events at Cable Street proceeded from a relative decline in anti-fascist activity during 1935. The perception that Cable Street was the dramatic climax of an uninterrupted sequence of ascending conflicts between fascists and anti-fascists starting in 1932 and culminating in October 1936 may be widely shared, but it has little foundation in fact. It should additionally be noted that any satisfactory chronology must also recognise that anti-fascist responses from early 1936 became increasingly defined in terms of opposition to anti-Semitism. Indeed, the greater prominence afforded to anti-Semitism by the BUF led to more substantive involvement by the Jewish community in anti-fascist activities, thereby widening the base of opposition to domestic fascism.

It is common knowledge that the BUF's campaign against Jewry was concentrated in the East End of London where the Jewish community was estimated to number over 100,000 in a national Jewish population of 330,000. Combining a generous supply of street meetings with increasing levels of anti-Semitic intimidation, harassment and violence, the BUF's campaign began in Bethnal Green in late 1935 before being widened out to other East End districts during 1936. Menacingly, this new departure procured significant numbers of new recruits for British fascism in an area already infused with an anti-Semitic tradition that
originated in hostility to the migration of large numbers of Jews to East London from Eastern Europe between 1870 and 1914. In trying to capitalise on local successes in the East End and attract wider national interest, Mosley announced a high-profile meeting at the Albert Hall scheduled for 22 March 1936. After the dip in anti-fascist activity during 1935, this announcement served to reanimate the Communist Party. Alarmed by the political advantage that the BUF was gaining from its East End campaign it resolved to bring Mosley's progress to an abrupt halt and accordingly pressed for a mass demonstration against Mosley's Albert Hall meeting. This was seen as an opportunity to repeat the Hyde Park 'victory' of September 1934 and, following its example, the Co-ordinating Committee for Anti-Fascist Activities was resurrected, albeit temporarily.

Returning to political activity, John Strachey once more assumed the mantle of anti-fascist figurehead and, under the auspices of the Co-ordinating Committee for Anti-Fascist Activities, issued a circular calling for a demonstration outside the Albert Hall. In line with the Hyde Park counter-demonstration, Strachey's call was publicised by the Daily Worker and was joined by an appeal from the CPGB for all working-class organisations in London to give their full support. As many as 250,000 leaflets were distributed. These were mainly directed towards East London Jews where local events were linked with the repression of Jews in Germany. Informed by a 'class analysis', the CPGB attacked anti-Semitism on socio-political rather than racial grounds, insisting that anti-Semitism was an instrument used by capitalists to scapegoat the ills of capitalist society. The Communist Party castigated Mosley for following the example of Hitler who, according to the CPGB, was turning the Jew into a scapegoat for capitalism. Lebzelter has argued that by analysing anti-Semitism in this way, as a socio-political problem specific to capitalist societies, the Communist Party was 'in fact less concerned about the lot of unfortunate Jews than about the principle involved'. Nevertheless, by stressing that it was leading the active opposition against fascist-related anti-Semitism, the CPGB succeeded in drawing into the Communist movement East London working-class Jews offended by the passivity of both the local Labour Party and the leaders of Anglo-Jewry.

Although sections of the East End Labour Party were sympathetic towards anti-fascism, the local hierarchy was dominated by Irish Catholics, who tended to hold greater hostility for atheistic communism than fascism. Moreover, the Jewish communal leadership as