

A GUIDE TO PRIMARY AND SECONDARY RESOURCES FOR EDUCATORS

During the 1980s young Asians in Newham and their supporters – including hundreds of schoolchildren – took action against racist attacks and in support of their youth services. In February and March 2018 some of the participants in those events were interviewed as part of the Journey to Justice/Living Song Music and Freedom Project. Interviews and explanatory text by Martin Spafford and Ilona Aronovsky.

Exhibition banners with this text and photos, as well as film clips with extracts from the interviews, are available for use in schools, youth clubs and community groups.

Please contact info@journeytojustice.org.uk

STARDUST YOUTH CLUB AND EVERYDAY RACISM

Racism was a fact of life for Newham's young Asians in the 1970s and 1980s.

I lived most of my life as a youth [in Canning Town] in fear. You couldn't go to sleep at night because you had youth running up and down the road with the Union Jack and every now and then you'd know that some poor Asian family's had its window smashed.

Abdul Karim, school student

The Asian kids [at Trinity Boys' School] would make sure they got on the first buses that arrived as soon as school finished. But if you had detention you would be the one that's left there on your own and it would give time for the local racist guys that would come and give you a good kicking.

Goga Khan, school student

The police and other statutory agencies were not understanding the issues concerning Asian and Black youth. They were at the receiving end of racist abuse, racist violence and also constant police harassment on the streets.

Nasser Patel, West Ham Trades Council Secretary

In 1976 Newham community worker Carolyn Sikorski and a social worker set up Stardust Asian Youth Centre. Activities included pool, table tennis and street dance. As attendance grew to well over a hundred every Saturday afternoon, it moved from Shaftesbury School to Kensington Youth Centre. It was a place where young people could bring the issues they faced.

We wanted them to feel safe, secure and confident. We would get young people together to sit and talk about problems and make suggestions or organise what action to be taken.

Satnam Singh, Newham teacher and Stardust youth worker

Photo: Andrew Wiard



Mass demonstration after the murder of Akhtar Ali Baig

JOURNEY TO JUSTICE/ NEWHAM MONITORING PROJECT STRUGGLES FOR JUSTICE AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN NEWHAM

The youth centre was helping people by having discussions in small groups on issues which were affecting them, racism being one, police harassment being the other. And then obviously the identity bit, creating an understanding of the different Asian cultures. What we're doing here, why we're here, and moving forward positively. And that helped because that was all done in a safe, warm environment. It provided me with confidence, with a calmer, common voice.

Abdul Karim

In 1980 a young man, Akhtar Ali Baig, was murdered in the street by a white teenager, sparking angry protests from the Asian community. Activists then set up the Newham Monitoring Project (NMP) to challenge the authorities about racism.

Goga Khan remembers his father taking him to the demonstration. Two years later in September 1982, aged fifteen and now at Little Ilford School, he was in the playground after lunch.

About five or six older guys came through the gate. They just started hitting a couple of my friends that was standing near the gate, punching, kicking them, shouting racist abuse. So as one of them comes to hit me, I've hit him back and everyone's started to fight. The teacher broke it up. Later I was in my Maths class and the deputy head and two policemen walked in. They put me in the back of a police car and they've taken me to Forest Gate police station and locked me up in a cell.

Goga was terrified of his father's reaction but his dad confronted the police:

'Would you have wanted my son to be in hospital now? He was in school. Why was these guys coming into school to beat him up? What did you want him to do? Good, he done the right thing....'

I felt like, yes, he's got his arms round me and I feel good.

Goga was released, but word went round that friends of the man he'd hit were coming back to kill him.



A STREET ATTACK AND NEWHAM 8

A week later on September 24th:

The younger kids said 'we're scared to go home.' So [I and some other guys] said 'OK, let's walk around in a group and whoever lives where can just slip off as you're getting near to your house.'

A car screeched up and three guys jumped out with sticks and attacked two of my friends. Our reaction was these were the guys that said they was coming to kill me. Half of us run off and the few of us that stayed started fighting back. The next thing, a police dog van screeched up and they arrested eight of us and took us to Forest Gate police station.

'You guys just beat up police officers, you're in big trouble, you're really going to go to prison'. That's when we realised, these guys that attacked us, they was police officers!

Goga Khan

Eight young men including Goga were charged with affray and actual bodily harm to police officers. Their case became known as the **Newham 8**. Word spread rapidly.

A few days later a community campaign was formed in a meeting at the local gurdwara.

Stardust got behind us along with the Newham Monitoring Project and the elders of the community with a bit more experience. A few of the local councillors got on board, the local teachers helped us. Most of all our parents, law abiding citizens that had been in this country from the late 50s, 60s, the sort of people that had never got a parking ticket, never done anything wrong – but they stood up behind us and said 'we're not going to let this happen to our children.' We grew up with these racists living next door to us and thought 'no, we're not gonna take this no more.'

Goga Khan



Outside the magistrates court; striking school students and other supporters

Advised by Unmesh Desai from NMP, Satnam proposed the noted human rights solicitor Gareth Pierce should be the Newham 8 lawyer. In the days that followed youth at Stardust planned how they would give support.

Stardust was very important to get the local community together because it wasn't just a Little Ilford thing. The girls from Plashet School helped us in the campaign, the kids from Langdon School, Trinity School. That's what brought us together. If there was no Stardust, half the people wouldn't have known what was going on.

Goga Khan

JOURNEY TO JUSTICE/ NEWHAM MONITORING PROJECT STRUGGLES FOR JUSTICE AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN NEWHAM

They decided to call on school students to strike and join the a picket outside West Ham Magistrates Court when the eight appeared for committal. Activists, some teachers and Stardust youth workers supported them.

The Director of Education said people fomenting a strike were damaging children's education, so we retaliated with 'Racist attacks damage education' on the strike leaflet

Ilona Aronovsky, Newham teacher

I was leafleting outside Langdon School and got recognised by the headteacher, reported to the Director of Education and suspended. We managed to get forty plus councillors' signatures that no action should be taken against teachers or pupils taking part in the strike.

Satnam Singh

When the day came, hundreds of Newham pupils joined the strike.

I got on an empty bus and by the time it got to Stratford it was heaving with kids in high spirits. Loads of kids were there already. They felt so strongly they'd really turned out.

Ilona Aronovsky

Me, my sisters and classmates discussed who would strike and not go to school for the magistrates court picket. I went absent and my parents got a letter from the Head, we all did. I was called in by the Year Head to be "spoken to".

I was 15, and sitting exams that summer, so it was a "big deal". I felt strongly any child has the right to go to school without fear or danger.

When the Head's letter arrived, I was mortified, and thought about hiding it. Although I didn't go on the picket because I had to go with my mum to a medical appointment, I explained to my Dad what was happening to school kids. He became very worried and reminded me to work hard and tell him if any problems happen in or outside school. He started driving us to school and picking us up, or getting my uncle to get us. My parents must have felt it was a real threat and took what was happening seriously.

Schoolgirl, Stratford School 1982

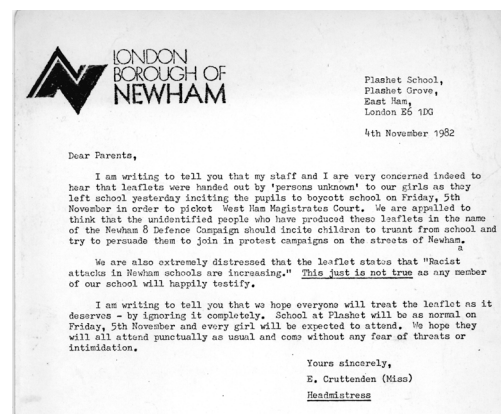
Racist Attacks damage education ! ALL OUT ON NOVEMBER 5th Dear Parents,

Newham 8 are being victimised for defending schoolkids against racist attacks.

BOYCOTT CLASSES ON FRIDAY, 5th NOVEMBER, IN PROTEST.

The youths who were arrested need all our support. They were arrested for defending you. Are we going to allow such attacks to continue? **NO!!**

The School authorities have taken no action whatsoever while police have arrested the victims of racist attacks. It is time we made them sit up and take notice. It is for this reason that a lot of schoolkids feel they should boycott school on November 5th and go to picket the court.



THE NEWHAM 8 CAMPAIGN AND TRIAL

The Newham 8's defence team barristers were all leading human rights lawyers: Rudy Narayan, Michael Mansfield, Helena Kennedy and Lord Gifford.

They opened up the case and showed the jury and judge what had actually been happening in Newham up until that particular day. I remember one thing that Gareth Pierce always said – 'as long as you tell the truth you can never go wrong.' Yes, I hit a police officer... but I hit him to defend myself.

Goga Khan

Support for the campaign came from across the country, especially Asian and Black youth and community movements and antiracist organisations co-ordinated by the Newham Monitoring Project.

A year later, when the case was heard at the Old Bailey, students from several Newham schools went on strike again and formed a picket outside the court for several days.

You'd have 250 people outside with banners and placards and that. Because we was schoolkids and defending the other schoolkids.

Goga Khan

Racists were attacking Asian schoolkids, so we meant it when we chanted 'Self Defence is No Offence' outside the Old Bailey. Charges of conspiracy and affray could have put those young guys in prison. It was a horrendous strain for their parents and families. We went to the trial for six weeks. There was a real sense of community and looking out for each other. It was truly amazing!

Schoolgirl, Stratford School 1983

The judge accepted that the young men had acted in self-defence and directed the jury to find Goga and three others not guilty. Four were found guilty of affray but their punishment was fifty hours community service at Stardust!

Nothing, however, happened to the police, exposed in court for carrying out the attack. Nevertheless, this and the Newham 7 case the following year played an important part in the rising confidence of Black and Asian young people – in Southall, Brixton, Liverpool, Greenwich and Bradford for example – to challenge the racism of the police force on the streets, in the courts and through community organisation. This impacted on public awareness and forced the issue onto the national agenda.



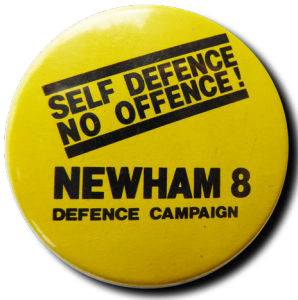
The Newham 8: Rana, Indy, Raja, Mat, Punkaj, Goga, Bop, Gurj

Things were now changing. Young people were not going to take it lying down, they were going to confront this. With the support of activists it became quite high profile.

Satnam Singh

JOURNEY TO JUSTICE/ NEWHAM MONITORING PROJECT

STRUGGLES FOR JUSTICE AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN NEWHAM



Policing has had to change because the police service has been exposed. They can only do it if they change in consultation, in partnership with local communities.

Nasser Patel

It was the start of the change ... the roll of the ball.

Goga Khan

A trainee solicitor assisting Gareth Pierce, and also Chair of Stardust, was Imran Khan, later to be the solicitor for the family of Stephen Lawrence after the murder in 1994. The vital alliance between community activists, antiracist campaigners and forensic researchers putting in the long, hard work that achieved the Lawrence inquiry was developed a decade earlier in Newham and other places.

A few years later when it was shown in the Stephen Lawrence case that the Metropolitan Police are institutionally racist, we had actually proven that a few years earlier.

Goga Khan

Crucial for the Newham 8, too, was unwavering support from their families. Goga says how the case affected him:

It brought me a lot more closer to my father because he really defended me, 100% supported me. If it wasn't for this I wouldn't have seen that side of him, if it wasn't for him I would have done not half of this.

Goga Khan

Most of all, this was a story of young people's organisation and solidarity. The Newham 8 were attacked when they were helping younger pupils get home safely. When they needed support Stardust was the place where school students met to discuss and plan, coming out in their hundreds.



The picket outside the Old Bailey

SAVE OUR STARDUST

In November 1985 came the threat that Stardust might close. By this time it was running four sessions a week in Newham North East Labour Party rooms on High Street North. The Party wanted to sell the building and Stardust hoped to buy it with funds from the Urban Aid Programme. However, other buyers had been approached, though Stardust thought they had first refusal. Stardust members – including Abdul Karim aged sixteen – decided to occupy the building.

It was through no choice, they're going to shut the youth centre down, we're not going to have nowhere to go, everyone's going to go their own way and we're going to split up. We had a meeting at the park and we went to NMP as well where we made placards and drew up our banners. Then we thought up the idea of having balaclavas because we didn't want to get victimised.

Abdul Karim

On Sunday 24th November about thirty young people broke into the building.

We had sleeping bags. There was electricity. No one turned that off. We used to winch down a bucket and somebody would buy us Kentucky, or they'd bring us some chapattis or something, and winch it back up. We did not realise how much publicity we were attracting. We were getting people horning and supporting us, people sticking their fingers up at us, it was a mixed response.

Abdul Karim

Two of the young people, Abdul Karim and 'Ash' became key leaders and Newham community worker Carolyn Sikorski's support was crucial. The occupation divided the local Labour Party.

The officers of the Party proposed to call the police to haul the occupiers out. We were furious because of campaigns like Newham 8 and the racist way the police treated Asian and Black youth.

Ilona Aronovsky, then a Labour Party General Committee Member



Fred Jones, with Labour Party members looking on, reading a note from the occupiers. RIGHT: Imran Khan (chair of Stardust Management Committee) and Carolyn Sikorski sending up pizzas.



After heated debate, the police were not sent in. Instead, Council Leader Fred Jones went to see the occupiers.

Fred did actually take the time out to come down and see us and ask for our list of demands. We was talking to him through the window.

Abdul Karim

JOURNEY TO JUSTICE/ NEWHAM MONITORING PROJECT

STRUGGLES FOR JUSTICE AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN NEWHAM

Fred Jones was a leader with whom we had established a relationship. He appeared to be supportive to us, on the same wavelength. They were passing notes down by bucket and he wrote a note to them saying 'You've got to come to the town hall for us to have a discussion about this.'

Satnam Singh, Newham teacher and Stardust youth worker

Satnam took a delegation of young people to the Town Hall (still wearing balaclavas) where they reached agreement on 26th November and the occupation ended.

Clearly part of our work was to advise them, suggest to them what was possible. We managed to get an agreement for the hall to be used and some funding for a part time youth worker with it on three evenings, so we were successful.

Satnam Singh

Stardust was saved. Direct youth-led action had got support from experienced community workers, parents and activists in the ruling Labour party. Council elections were coming up and local votes were needed.

It needed that direct action. It was the right time and the right place. But it needed all of those components to come together.

Abdul Karim

Membership rose to 500. There were more campaigns for funding and a suitable venue. In the late 1980s, when youth services across the borough were restructured, Stardust closed down.



Stardust members demonstrating in 1986

[All interviews took place in Newham in February 2018. Quotations slightly abridged with the agreement of the interviewees. Photos by Ilona Aronovsky except where credited otherwise. Information also taken from newspaper reports, campaign leaflets and Labour Party minutes.]

To download this and other stories of community action for justice in Newham go to <http://journeytojustice.org.uk/projects/newham-history/>

All images © Newham Monitoring project