**Interview Details**

**Name of interviewee: Asad Rehman**

**Project: Growing Old Gracefully - SubCo**

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**Name of interviewer: Francis Ball**

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*Interviewer*

Interviewee

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*It’s the twenty forth of July and I’m interviewing Asad Rehman as part of the SubCo project, and the interviews at the War On Want offices. Erm, would you mind giving me your date of birth please?*

Seven, ten, sixty-six.

*And where were you born?*

Born in Pakistan.

*And what did your family do while you were growing up?*

My father was originally, worked in the cotton- the knitting factories. And then he worked on the buses.

*Uhuh.*

As a conductor.

*What, what part of Pakistan did you grow up in?*

Err, so I grew up in a place called Dinga which is in Pakistan’s Punjab. And then we moved to the UK when I was err, young and I grew up in Burnley in Lancashire.

*What brought your family to the UK?*

Err like many people from Pakistan migration err, came- like many, like much of the Asian community people originally- my father first came to Europe err, err for work and went to you know, the, the travelling through Europe, Germany and Belgium and then up to Britain, and then erm, the patterns of migration that we’d seen in, particularly in err, in the UK err when the Britain went out to the colonies and former colonies and recruited people for erm, for work erm, they went to certain parts of Pakistan, and err and recruited people for certain industries. So erm, the north-west, the small old cotton towns err, all err, err at the you know, had a, a Pakistani community primarily, primarily was Pakistani, some Bengali community, but mainly Pakistani, that were brought over originally basically to work in the manufacturing industry for their industries and erm, err and so in Lancashire and Yorkshire it was the cotton industry and was like one of the big employers err of course the manufacturing industry.

*Yeah. Err, what were your sort of first impressions on coming to the UK?*

Err, so I grew up in err, it’s- Burnley is a small working class town erm, it is err… it, you know, like many small working class towns there I would say it is, you know, bore the brunt of the deindustrialisation the err… Suffered huge issues of racism and racist violence. Err, the growth of the far-right, beleaguered community and we, at the time, the migrant community so going through the schooling system was you know, for like many of my generation was err fighting around primarily racists err, it was protecting our community from racist gangs. Our house was firebombed, as most places would say, I think of that era you know. Not suffering a racist attack at least once a week would have been quite surprising. Err, it was yeah. Err, as a community err, we were under attack a lot. Err, cos it was relatively small community that was trying to establish itself, it was a small community, in a place where you know, old- first the pits had gone, then the knitting factories were going and erm, and so it had issues of social and urban deprivation. Most of the Asian community lived in, sort of, extreme poverty, terrible housing, all of the normal sort of thing. And of course a lot of racism within the labour move- labour force as well, so err as Asian workers err, demanded better working conditions or equal pay, as white workers people were being sacked. My father was sacked from the knitting, from the knitting factories for, like many other people, for demanding, or wanting equal pay with the white workers, so there was differentiated pay if you were Asian or if you were white doing exactly the same kind of job. Erm, and then my father you know, err we lived in Burnley, there was no jobs, my father used to go and work in Manchester and again that was quite common for a lot of immigrant families, and the men were forced to move to other places to try and find work. My father even worked abroad, and went to Holland to work ‘cos there was more job opportunities, but as a family we still lived in Burnley. And yeah, I mean it’s what politicised me, it’s what first drew me to err anti-racist politics, Asian youth movements in the late seventies, early eighties, erm it was a phenomenon of course not unique to Lancashire, it was a phenomenon that was taking place all round the country: err, lots of racism and racist violence, and in fact it’s what drew me to Newham, because erm, as a community when faced with all of these attacks and, and thinking about how do we erm, challenge the everyday racist violence, the institutional racism, the failure of the police for example to respond, so those days you never used to have telephones in your house I remember as a child, you used to go to the phone box to ring the police because there were gangs of racists would be graffitiing all over our house, putting fire through the letterbox or would you know, be threatening your mum erm, and you know of course the police failing to respond, would not respond, would ignore, and then when we as Asian kids were defending ourselves as I say from racist attacks, I mean my school that I went to, the NF would openly sell their newspaper in the school, there was a lot of racist gangs, Paki-bashing was seen as like the thing to do at lunch time and at break. The very small number of Asian kids that were there or black kids that were there would barricade ourselves in classrooms at lunch for safety and then fight our way home, because you’d have to go all the way through this… It was a distance to get back home. And err, yeah so it was a, quite a, a, I mean it was a very, it was an atmosphere that of course erm, could do two things, it could leave you despondent or it could leave you err, asking those questions like, why? And, how do we change this? And err, and, and it was a time where also growth of a lot of black self-organisation where orga- communities were organising themselves, say demanding and reasserting their rights and err, when I was err you know, at school, we settled an Asian youth movement, there was a growth of Asian youth movements taking place all round the country. Also in very similar patterns, so then issues about self-defence, erm and then you know, as teenager I was, became aware of the kids of the Newham seven and the Newham eight and it’s what first erm, ‘cos never even knew a place called Newham. But it spoke to all of our err, it spoke to communities all round the country, which is why, for example, when people talk about err pivotal moments in black political history, they talk about the Bradford twelve in nineteen eighty one, and then they talk about the Newham seven and the Newham eight, because this was the communities that were saying we’re not taking it anymore. We’re organising, we’re building our own community resistance, we’re demanding err, our rights, we’re going to challenge the institutions, we’re going to erm, and, and you know, and it was err, I think… Must’ve been… sixteen, seventeen and I told my parents I was going on a school trip to London and I came to Newham on my first demonstration and came to support and erm, yeah. It’s err, and so after I’d, at university I was very active and of course very sympathetic to anti-racist politics, but as soon as it finished I was like I’m going to Newham, because Newham like- Newham was where the community was really ground-breaking, it was organised to an extent that it was erm, but it was also living and facing you know, a… People like shocked now when you say it, look at Newham now, and then you think about what Newham was like from the eighties, you know, it was a dividing line, if you went, you couldn’t move, you couldn’t err move to the south of Newham for example, the local authority had a colour bar, would not allow, would not give housing to black and err black people so that’s why all the public housing in the south for a, for decades was very white and the black community was congregated primarily in the north of the borough, primarily in private housing, terrible sort of poor housing. Err, it was forced to sort of be in those areas, and out of that cauldron of, of sort of politics and issues was people you know, emerged lots of different things including subsequently Eastwoods Trust and then SubCo.

*Mm. Erm, could you explain sort of how you became aware of the struggle in Newham sort of living up north and how it was related to you?*

Well, as I said I joined this thing called the Asian youth movement, and ironically it erm, my, some, like many families my mum was err, sort of housewife but then was doing sort of piecemeal work, usually at home sort of, you do sowing work at home, err its counted on how any pieces you do and blah blah blah. It’s toil work but for very, very low pay. And then ym mum decided for a while that she wanted to learn English so there was a scheme err, in err like a voluntary scheme and this woman had put herself forward, was an Asian nurse at the local hospital, and she came and err, she an Indian nurse, came saying she was going to teach my mum English, and a couple of weeks later she decided she didn’t want to do that, that she was going to teach this Indian nurse how to cook, how to do all these sorts of things. But this nurse was, she’d been active, and she would talk, tell us what’s going on here. She was new to the area, would ask what’s this? What we’re doing? We’d have, in the mornings we’d get all the kids together and then we’d walk together to the school because if you walk in small groups you’d get attacks, and then you’d have to protect the younger kids, and the older kids and, err and then it was the same when the day ended, we’d get all the younger kids in the middle of the older kids and we’d walk back home, because there was always you know, there’d always be some racist incident, I mean, either violent or Paki- you know, name calling or whatever. And then when you’re back in the area, the area itself would be subject to a lot of attacks. And if you went to the town, you know, it was very common for people to like you know, not only spit, pour beer on you know, err Asian women and put dogs, all the things they knew that people in the community were against, meant many people were very fearful of going into certain areas. Err, and she handed me a leaflet saying oh, there’s this other thing, there’s these people they’re working, they’ve suffered the same kind of thing, and they’ve set up this thing called the Asian youth movement, and then she was like great, that’s exactly what we want to do as well. We hadn’t- we called it something but we were doing that, young people coming together, protect their community, trying to stand together, and at the same time I was trying to better understand you know, all of these issues like why, and I was becoming more political, and I was reading stuff in you know, like why is there nobody in my school- why is there nothing I can see that looks like me, or tells my story, and of course at that period, if you, you know, apart from one Sunday morning program XXX (13:40) which was the only program aimed at the Asian community, everything else was programs that you know were, basically took the piss out of black people: Mind Your Language, Love Thy Neighbour, blah, blah, blah… all these kinds of stuff of course, casual racism was like an accepted part of, of, of everyday conversation, as was you know, and we lived quite near erm, Burnley football ground and erm, you know, so no matter when the travelling fans, or the home fans, we’d always be like if they can’t fight each other, they’d come and just trash our area, and then a bit of Paki bashing before they went home. And she, when she handed me those things, of those initial leaflets and like, oh wow, and then erm, when the Newham Seven happened erm, she put me in contact with them so we invited somebody up from Newham to come, talk, do a talk about what was going on there, what was this campaign, how could we support it and, you know, why this wasn’t an issue just for those people who lived in that area called Newham, it was an issue for all of us, ‘cos if we, if we lost the right to self-defence that was something that would affect all of us, but if we won, it was, it was part of our err, well we used to have slogans, stay here to fight, you know it was part of that kind of politics, we are saying this new generation, the first generation of kids going through schools, growing up there, we were saying we are not our parents generation you know, of course our parents generation were militant in their own way- this was the first really British born or British community that, that wasn’t saying we’re gonna be immigrants, they’ll one day kick us out, we’re saying now, we’re here, we’re not going to let you do these things, we’re going to demand that- we’re going to demand our rights. So erm, so that’s how I first got to know Newham, and erm, and the organisation Newham Monitoring Project which erm, was the organisation that ran, and was behind the Newham Seven and the Newham Eight campaigns.

*Excellent, erm well before we go on to talk about the Newham Monitoring Project, would you mind talking a little bit more about the organisation of the Asian youth movement? Was it like, a national thing with sort of local branches or was it all very much-?*

Yeah, it was a national err, err initiative. I mean basically it was sort of semi-spontaneous, but also err a framework, so you had erm, of course all the way through the seventies there’d been you know, black anti-racist campaigning, in the sixties there’d been lots of campaigning in terms of the immigration act and all of those. But a lot of those that, that campaigning had come via erm, traditional community infrastructure. So, Indian workers association, the mosques, the gurdwaras, the temples- they were the first fabric of my community really. Religious institutions were more than just religious institutions, they were the place where our community came together. There was a sense of we, there was a place where people you know, tried to help each other both in terms of you know, their everyday experience, but also you know, where you went for advice about you know, welfare, schools, blah and as a community, it was the community hub, but with the Asian youth it was the first time where we had err, a generation of people saying where, organising is not going to be in that place of just the religious institution. It’s going to be err, outside of that and its going to be in the our, like a united response. So err, the Asian youth movements were sat very much by the black movements, traditional Afro-Caribbean movements, all under an umbrella of calling themselves politically black, but the Asian youth movements were basically just trying to organise the young Asian people. And as I say, for the time it was primarily young men because issues of patriarchy were in the community, but it was mainly sort of men- young men. But they tried to it in a very political way. So, part of it was organic, part was, you know, there was this national thing, so people had heard about it, err they were saying yeah, that’s what I want to do, but a lot of time a lot of the impetus of it came because everybody was facing the same things. So if you were in Coventry, the national front was marching, they attacked the community, if you were in Sheffield, if you were in Bradford, if you were in Burnley, wherever you were, what did you do? You had to band together, what’s this, what would that look like? Okay it’s the Asian youth movement. Oh great, so now I’m not alone. And, and for a community that’s only small in number and of course at that point we were, all migrant communities together were possibly, you know, about three to four per cent of the country. Erm, scattered all across, and minorities everywhere, so we were always the minority in every town and every city. The sense of having a bigger, being part of belonging to something bigger was really, really important – and also gave you confidence and it made you realise that your experience wasn’t some isolated experience, right and it wasn’t- there was something much more systemic about this and, and therefore the response to it had to be more than just erm, reactive in the sense of yeah we can defend our community but, and that’s level one – defend; but who’s going to force through the political change that’s needed? Well we have to be organised to be able to do that, we had to demand from our institutions and our schools, taking racist attacks seriously. So I was involved in a school strike, again we had all, all the Asian kids in err, and all schools in Burnley all came out on the same day about the failure of schools to respond to racist violence, because the same experience was happening, and that’s part of where both the religious institutions and Asian youth movements helped because you know, here was a place you saw the kids who were in the other part of the town, went to that school, and they all said exactly the same- everybody had the same experience. Yeah, we’re attacked in the school and the teachers turn a blind eye. We’re attacked on the way, in the way, on the way to school and nobody cares. We call the police, the police don’t come, they come they’re, they’re more aggressive towards, and they call us names, blah, blah all of this. And so, you know, went so then you are able to organise and say okay, why don’t we all go out on strike? Why don’t we force them? And that will make them have to take us a bit more seriously. And yeah, and it was also sort of err a radic- attempt to, slightly more radical- well slightly more – it was a more radical analysis of racism, and of state racism erm, than the elements of our elite community that were, that had basically were more traditional in the sense of, there was power and authority, the best way to deal with power and authority was slightly being a subservient way, you’d go to them for a cup of tea, you’d meet the police have a cup of tea, you’d meet the councillor- but it would always be within a closed room, it’d always be- and so it was, you know, a bit of patronage, like okay we met the community leaders, everything’s okay. And there was a whole generation of people saying no, that’s not you know- our power comes on the street and our power comes when we’re organising. It’s not going to- we have to force them to listen, we can’t negotiate. We’re not going to negotiate our right to not live free from attack, that’s not something that you’re going to be able to settle on, they should be responding. So it was a very different type of politics. And it struck a chord because of course it was the period and it was experience so, in some places people organised and err, err so in Southall in, in- called Southall youth movement, and in many places the, the sort of the impetus of it came from err, racist murders so when a racist murder took place, large groups of young people probably would come together, there would be a protest and people saw it happened again, there would be serious incidents or, it, it embryonically people were like connected so we shouldn’t- we’re all- we, we’re not all coming together when it’s just err, erm you know, to protest over the latest racist murder, we should be organised. Erm, not just for self-defence but also to make those demands. So it was a bit of both. So the more you heard, oh there’s a youth movement there, the more it inspired you to set up your own youth movement. But it, it wasn’t like oh, here’s a great idea, everybody, because partly we didn’t have the infrastructure to do that. In those days if you wanted to learn or hear about those things, it required somebody handing you a piece of paper with it written on or you being in that, you know, because that- how would you know what was going on even in Blackburn which was eight miles away or Preston unless you knew people. So how would you know what was going on in London- you could only read about what was in the newspapers or on television. And of course, that told you a little bit of stories, but you know, it was the Asian youth movement that was starting to publish and print stuff and leaflets, and of course NMP was doing that.

*Yeah, erm, how- what was the effect of the school strike and how long were you on strike?*

I was just err, it was just a day, I mean it was more symbolic. I mean it was trying to force the- both the police and the local authority to say err, so they would, they would respond to racist attacks erm, you know and it was also just more for us as a, as a sign of our own sort of confidence and strength. I don’t think it materially made a huge amount of difference err, and to be honest most, at least in Burnley, most of the time we were spent was, you know, physically defending ourselves, so it was, that was, that became like you know, protecting our isolated families who lived in areas where there wasn’t, much of a black community or Asian community in that area. But when I, when- I grew up first in Burnley, we lived in a very white working class area, very, very white, we were the only I think, non-white family that was living there. Within a period of like years we moved to another area where there was a small Asians- because it was just not- it was too hard being by yourself and there were families in those were subject to a lot of racist attacks. And sort of kids from the other areas would sort of go and help them fight the racists, oh there was that racist gang every night, they’ll come and smash our- oh let’s go and find them and… You know, it was, that was just the kind of nature of the political struggle at the time. It was as much you know, physical and about err, protecting yourself as it was- overtly with a political program. But one thing the Asian youth movement did do, it did help you understand what the politics of racism were. And for many of us, because we came from of course, communities erm, we were all from diaspora communities, and you saw what was happening. So when you saw the pictures of South African apartheid, or the bombing of Lebanon by the Israelis or you saw your own- you thought, why is it? Everywhere, you know, those who are not white they’re just being- lives don’t matter and why they being killed? Okay, we must fight, not only about racism here, but about colonialism there and you know, sort of fighting and standing up for the people of South Africa and Palestine was important. And, so it was internationalising our, our err experience and collecting it to a much bigger thing and erm. I think the Asian youth movement did a great job in terms of- I’ve still got my membership card from that period and it says you know, No To Racism, No To Colonialism, No To Imperialism. And, and that was a very political expression, you know, ‘cos it located struggle, no matter where you were in a much bigger picture. And that was erm, yeah that was so important.

*Yeah. So what was it like when you moved down to London?*

Well I, I first went to university. I went to university in Essex erm, which was, I suppose going from one weird place to another weird place. So err, I went to university in a place called Colchester, University of Essex, which has had thirty five thousand in the town and a campus university. And so the townies would be- the soldiers would- the townies beat up the black students. So when I went there we had a security mini-bus, so you could be able to go from the campus to your place, in the evening you would have a mini-bus, you paid twenty pence, you could then be safely dropped because the amount of people being attacked going home. So it was mainly women and black students would get priority on these mini buses. And its an area with lots of yeah, similar problems, I was by now I’d come from the Asian, Asian youth movement, had then been involved with the miners strike, went to university, you know, was very, very political there and still very active in lots of anti-racist struggles. So I knew Newham, I knew NMP quite well, because at that period we would you know, be in like the anti-fascist movements going out, trying to err, stop the NF and the BNP at the time, blah, blah, blah. And so when I, when I finished my university err, I was intent on coming to Newham, but I didn’t actually first live in Newham, I, I- the only place I could- I lived first in North London, then south London, but I was trying to volunteer in Newham, ‘cos I’d, I’d heard so much and learned, knew so much about this amazing organisation. And I’d come across NMP people all the time, erm and err at- and I knew people who, who then were- I was political active with who’d gone to Newham. And Newham at the time was attracting basically, every young black radical there was, was moving to Newham because it was like the cauldron of struggle. You wanted to help our community come to East London, you know, on every front, we’re fighting on every front, but it- I thought all fights, it was also incredibly vibrant. It was like this confident community was- and in this midst lots of other things were starting to happen, you know. Burgeoning art scene, burgeoning cult scenes, saying you know, still remember one of the debates: is brown the new cool white, is brown the new black, we were like no we’ve always been cool, you don’t, you might not know it. So the underground clubs that started you know, there was a lot- there was expressions of it happening all over. So yeah, so I mean, and then I was very fortunate to get a job with Newham Monitoring Project, so I started working with NMP.

*Cool. Umm, would you mind, before we get on to that, just explaining a little bit about your involvement with the miner’s strike? And how erm, the sort of black political movement and that struggle intersected?*

Well, erm… So I think there’s two parts of that story err for- as in there’s a bigger story which is about how the black community and the miners- miners err, I mean the connection between the both. And erm, a few years before the miner’s strike, there was a, an industrial struggle called the Grunwick Strike here in, in North London actually was there. And it was lead primarily by err, Asian women er, not young, elderly, middle aged Asian women, who were immigrants from- migrants from Africa, Gudjarati women. And they went out on strike and they were at strike for about a year, fighting for union recognition. And it became a, a pivotal moment in labour, in the labour movement because up to that point, and during that whole period of course there were large parts of the labour movement that were saying our real problem is black workers because they, they’re taking our jobs, they’re depressing our wages, they get blah, blah, blah. So you know, they were open- openly supporting, you know, racist and far right part- and much of the union movement was very hostile, I mean, the white workers and white shop stewards in many places were very hostile to black workers. But during Grunwick there was err, this was a, an attempt to sort of say we’re, we’re all workers. So these are workers fights, the best way to tackle erm, racism and best way to tackle sort of err, low pay, is actually all of us belonging to unions together. And in Grunwick, erm, the then Arthur Scargill lived in Yorkshire, brought erm thousands of miners to support their picket. And it, and it was like in the folklore right? People came, and those, you know, mass pickets and blah, blah, blah, and all that, but in became like all the miners have come out and.. so that was one part of the story. So there was like a- inside the community there was like a, was a- erm, amazing stroke, but there was a lack of, a sense of, of err, err of solidarity to the miners because of that. And in fact, later during the miner’s strike when the miners were err, being starved back to work when Margaret Thatcher cut welfare and cut all the benefits and blah, blah, blah, blah… A lot of temples and gurdwaras and mosques opened their doors and started feeding the miners with many people saying, we remember you stood with us. So there was a, there was- the political part of our community said we’re all in one struggle. There were, I mean it’s interesting for one, my first pick- one of my first pickets I went to I was told err, err fuck off black bastard, we don’t want you in here. Erm… but by the end of the strike you know, I was err, at the Royal Albert Hall and surrounded by miners and people crying as the you know, played the Last Pit in the Rhondda and the bands were mar- you know, all marking, going back and so many of the people in the miner’s strike say, really understand it, ‘cos when we used to see you riot in nineteen eighty one and Toxteth and Brixton and blah, blah, we’d think ah god, what they going on about. So now we understand what policing’s like, because we now have understood what that police violence looks like. So there was all- there was also this relation, this common thing, of an experience of racism err, an experience of policing, of the state violence against you, and overwhelmingly our community was working class so they instinctively understood they had a class solidarity. I remember my mum, who doesn’t really speak a word of English, looking at the news and then watching and she said that they, that man Arthur Scargill is a good man, he’s standing up for working people. It’s terrible what’s happening, go around all the aunties and go collect food for them, you know. And we used to do that, go around- these were poor working- Asian working class families, but they all would give something and we’d donate to the miners support fund right? Just cans, what they had and blah, blah. But it was a, it was a very, you know- it’s hard to describe how much it was, it wasn’t the miners that were on strike, it was like half the country was on this side of- and then there was the other half and on this side you had all this centre, you couldn’t go anywhere without people stood, I mean every bus station, tube station, people stood with, with buckets, support the miners, support the miners, you know, and it was, yeah, I wouldn’t say it was nostalgic looking back but, there were the big industrial union people, people understood what it meant in terms of fighting you know, and Margaret Thatcher had been elected. Everyone saw this was like a, a real attack on the power of, of, of unions. So there was this sort of, whilst individual workers and miners some were a reflection of society which was casual racism and all of those sort of things, also struggled, really forged that stronger sense of err, collective solidarity and unity. And reinforced those relationships that existed and there were you know, especially with the miners there were lots of really radical miners who you know, who would tell you about, and the first time I ever heard about Paul Robeson, you know who’d tell you about you know, the miners and Paul Robeson in the nineteen twenties came and signed to this and, and that they understood what global solidarity mean- meant, and so of course… So for a community that was also diaspora sort of had all this, there was a, a sort of a common vision of the world even though it was not necessarily articulated. It was, you know, for many people in the Asian community, they would say, you know, it’s… working people, we suffer, we’re the ones that are suffering and so they saw class solidarity along those lines.

*Cool. Umm, when did you start working for Newham Monitoring Project and what was your role?*

So I, I joined err NMP in nineteen eighty nine err, after university, and er, I- we were a, I mean, our titles didn’t really mean anything so we, we had a, err case workers in communication and blah, blah, blah, but literally everybody did everything together. So I joined small team, four people worked for NMP erm, and erm yeah, I was- everybody did casework, everybody did advise, everybody did campaigning, everybody did everything. You know it was like, one of those jobs you just, you did everything that the community needed and the job entailed.

*What were the specific needs that you were addressing or particular campaigns that you worked on?*

Oh, huge amount. Err, I mean so, I mean you know the history of NMP? Yeah?

*Yeah, bits and pieces.*

Yeah okay so. Erm, have you interviewed somebody about the history of NMP in this?

*Err, yeah I’ve erm, I’ve talked to Unmesh Desai so far, so be interesting to get your take on sort of, trajectory of the organisation there. Erm, but other people I’ve talked to sort of erm, even if they didn’t actually work for NMP were obviously aware of it and sort of protested alongside and organised alongside them.*

So, so Unmesh, I mean we worked very probably, very correctly tell you about, about the formation and, and those first, that first probably two decades of the work that he was doing. So, you know, yeah I mean it came out of the, after the murder of Akhtar Ali Baig, err, I mean it was err, erm… It was very much the community saying we keep having to, you know, come together, why don’t we have our own thing just to tell us the scale of what was going on and then, err- and hats off to Unmesh because he came with a political vision, and he, he, and he was able to really err, help erm- I mean there was a lot of very political people, so there’s some of the original founders are actually, some of them are still around, some of them were also err, responsible, people like Gorshan towards Eastwood Trust and Gorshan Aman and all those… Erm, and, and literally they ran the most important campaigns in the country, I mean literally: Newham Seven, Newham Eight, but also the idea of community organising, a black community organising the idea of you know, telephone service, twenty-four hour emergency service, being able to- people going out to support you if you’re under attack. Understanding our cases were about supporting individual families but then building the power of our community to affect institutional change. Running hard hitting campaigns, never being afraid to- we would now talk truth to power, you know I think the Met called us the most sinister, damaging and divisive group operating in London, because we were uncompromising. We stood with our community and that also meant about how we were operated. So we were er, we were all in an advice centre together with Eastwoods Trust, we had an open door policy, you didn’t need an appointment to see anybody, and we would never turn you away, no matter what your problem was. We would run open advice sessions from the front, but erm, because we knew for many of our community they would be sent from there, to there, to there, to there without anybody so we would, I mean we would give advice in different languages erm, and we do basic things like for a lot of people who even getting an official letter, not understanding what the letter said, still remember every day you’d come to the office in the morning there’d be a queue of people outside, just bringing in their post saying, somebody would here, just read and tell me what it says. ‘Cos of course people are so scared of the state right, so scared of something- if I don’t do this right, something is gonna happen, I’ll be kicked out the country or I’m going to be this and blah, blah. So there was a huge- the need in the community had these huge unmet needs and, and it was a time and, you know, the local authority was being challenged by us about racist er, about its housing policies, about racism within the local authority I mean, there’s err, err plenty of press cuttings of you know, I knew- of councillors in Newham at the time talking about pakis and wogs, and we can’t- you know, we have to be- we’re here for ord- well, the white working class. Who are all these immigrants? We have to get them out, we’ll never give them housing. And this was you know, Labour MPs, and of course Newham’s always been a bit of a one party state in that. Erm, and then it, you know, we, we formed I think the first ideas about community ser- ser- patrols on the street. We err, and the big camp- campaigns around deaths in custody, you know, deaths in Newham, I remember C. S. Gas, Ibrahima Singh, two- I mean, really thinking about institutional racism, thinking about state violence, state- police were- and thinking about the different forms of racist violence from the racist to the organised fascists, NMP was very pivotal in smashing the fascists in Newham, I mean they were getting a third of the vote in the south. Erm, and you know, Barking Road was the dividing line, you didn’t go past it but many, many people in all parts of Newham would, you know, from the heartlands of our community around Forest Gate would be subject to lots of attacks and so those you know, having an organisation that supported you, that did your casework, that challenged the police, that looked for an instit- that challenged the local authority, brought in the best lawyers, brought in and, but understood our, you know, we were never going to win without community organising, and so from the demonstrations to the pickets at the police stations to the door knocking and… doors, and you know getting people on to the electoral register to vote out the BNP and vote down the BNP, you know, to physically defending the community. I mean NMP literally did everything and, and it was, and it also supported communities all around the country where people were facing very similar things, NMP said this experience is not unique, we’ve a lot to learn- we’ve a lot to share and learn and show solidarity so people in Newham would be supporting people in Scotland, in Wales. We did- we ran, you know a lot- the campaigns around for example all the erm, err prisoners who had been basically err, were victims of unfair trial, so Cardiff Three, Tottenham Three, you know, doing all those two, like more recently to the de Menezes’: Jean Charles de Menezes, shot dead in Stockwell, we ran his campaign; to the Lawrence’s, to Roy De- I mean there was, I think for a period of, you know from the eighties probably to about two thousand there was not s- there wasn’t anything happening in terms of around race, racism and policing and fascism that NMP either wasn’t central to, created a, inspired it, thought about it, I mean what that- and that was what Newham was able to do. It was bringing together so many people and creating this like, vibrancy of a community that- it was the everyday interactions making people thing great, yeah, yeah. So that issue and that issue, there’s a real link, why don’t we do this together? Why don’t we do that? Or, here’s an unmet need or here’s a huge injustice, how do we campaign around it? And that, as I said, that’s what sparked everything from the Asian Underground, to the Asian Youth- I mean, Asian Dub Foundation, to you know, goodness gracious me, and literally it was like this incredible sort of like, bloom of lots of different things happening because of course you get attacked in the clubs, you won’t get in the clubs, so you start opening your own clubs. You know, club nights, you know there were colour bars everywhere, blah, blah, blah, you know. So suddenly people thought you know, for, particularly for the Asian community ah, you’re not cool right, you had nothing, and then the Asian underground were like no we’ve always been cool, and you know, everything from the bindis to the.. suddenly been co-opted by mainstream society. Which in one sense was horrible for, for how all that process- but it was also a recognition that, you know, this was a community that was err, very, being much more confident, and you know, and our reach was very much all the way across East London, so of course all the stuff that was happening in Tower Hamlets, err the election of Derek Beacon, the BNP, the Rights For Whites campaign. You know, things that now have an echo as to what you know, err people always said you know, why is it the far-right able to grow and strengthen the way that it’s done in across other European countries for a long time. And because there were, we smashed it- we never allowed them to get beyond where they wanted to do it, and now they are, so this resurgence of the Free Tommy campaign, and the football lads and so- The, the fact that, you know, twenty four per cent of people said they would vote for an extremist anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant party shows you the deep well of racism that exists in society, but it also shows that, that never allowing to have a populist movement you know, was really important and NMP played a huge part in that. I mean really a central part in anti-fascist action, a central part of like, really promoting the no platform idea, you- no platformed them ideologically, politically but also physically. You defend our community, you don’t make, you don’t stand back from that, and that was a, a very radical kind of politics but it was politics that everybody in our community immediately understood and supported and, and you know, there was a huge level of support for, for NMP. A lot of times people actually also never realised it was NMP because we always also ran very much campaigns as the campaign, because we always said no, it’s unlike what you call the traditional left parachuting into areas for their own benefit, want to sell newspapers. We were intent on building community resilience, so you built around the family, you built it around the institutions and the organisation. You brought them together and you connected those and so a lot of times it were you know, defend the dean campaign, justice for Said Tehran memorial camp-. They would always- they’d be erm, campaign networks that we set up for specific campaigns and not always as, as Newham monitoring project. But we did everything from festivals, we did like you know, people’s festivals, anti-racist festivals in Newham and you know, on a few thousand pounds to have, you know, thirty thousand people come to a festival, a free festival in Newham. We had, you know, lots of top bands play for us, because suddenly we were you know, we were everywhere, we were doing things and that, and that, and we were constantly thinking about that, how do you take the space away from the right? How do you bring- create political culture? What does political identity look like? How do we act in solidarity? So erm, we used to take lots of young people to the north of Ireland and that was a very conscious decision, because if you’re in Belfast or anywhere else, a lot of times the only black person you’d ever see was a soldier. Err, and, but here in, in the UK you know, whilst there was an all- there was an understanding of oh, well, you know no dogs, no blacks, no Irish, well a lot of times the, the, the, the, the, the common experience of the Irish community and the black community erm, hadn’t been err, wasn’t being brought together. We intended to try and do that, so erm, at the time there was a running joke that when the Sinn Fein people come they would have err, black, there would be- we would provide security at their meetings and it was important symbolism for an Irish community to have, to see their leaders Gerry Adams having black stewards and, and us going to Belfast and meeting with families from people who had suffered, you know, whether from plastic bullets- because there was a politics of public order policing, how we knew these different communities being policed and so lots of very, very similarities about, oh, you mean they built a fortress police station? Oh, it’s a very- it’s nigh no longer police on the street, it’s in vans, oh it’s saturation policing and what does that mean? And how- and so there was a lot of learnings that we were also learning from each other or how we were responding to that, what does that mean? What is the police strategy around that? Okay, ah actually there’s a whole politics of, of what the state does when it thinks about suspect communities and what that means and how it addresses those and therefore what- how do we build our resilience to those things?

*What was erm, sort of police reaction to your work like and how did, how did you sort of interact them with the demonstrations and sort of stuff like that?*

They were scared shitless. They were literally scared of us. They would- they would err, I mean it would be, it’s an, it’s an- we’d had an odd relationship in the sense that you know, we would write to the police or you know, our letters would be like, hard, demand- call them racist, duh, duh, duh. They’d always respond, they’re want to, because we understood, you know, how you could CC the council, the papers, to this: how you make sure they feel under pressure to respond. And, you know, and every time we every meet with the police, they’d say have a cup of tea, oh there were a lot of cup of tea. But one time- what we want to know is why you’re not supporting this family, or why have you arrested this family? And the fact that when they’re, when they, for example, when they charge people we would have pickets of the court, the police station, we knew how to handle the media. We would be calling them out on television and so they were, they were always, they, they were faithful in the sense that, as I was saying, the deputy commissioner, Wyn George, he calls us the most damaging and divisive group operating, and you know, I mean… If you look back in terms of the archives they were, they were very fearful of this black radicalism, and in fact, if you look at you know, what mark now, all the papers that are released, they talk, I mean, the government talked about, there were, they feared this radical black activist that were blowing up, coming- and the strategy of, of how to break political blackness, reappoint community leaders, reappoint, you know, try and shift power from these community based organisations with a, with a political identity, to religious identity, to ethnic identities, to this and then, and to try and fragment the community. So you would have a myriad of just lots of different things rather than, you know, where is that commonality? Where are we coming together? Erm, but they were also I think, I think were, were… you know, were err, I mean grudgingly prob- very, understand I mean, there were black police officers who would then come to us and say it’s, you know, you’re err, what you’re doing and what you’re saying you know, they- yeah, they, they have meetings and they’re like, how do we stop this bad PR? What do we go? Why are- How are these people still able to do this and-? But it also threatened our funding and of course you know there was always a lot of pressure on you know, why is the local authority funding this radical organisation? Erm, and yeah, there was err, yeah…

*Would you mind talking a bit about how NMP was closed up?*

So err, I mean the NMP closed, I suppose, in the, err I mean initially, initially I, you know, there was erm, we were you know, a very much an important part of the community infrastructure in Newham. Erm, and what we’d seen at the time was more and more community organisations being attacked and being closed down. There was a shift from what we would call the community sector to the voluntary sector. The voluntary sector was only interested in services. Wasn’t interested in actually going beyond the services to say, what is institutional change that needs to happen? So the campaigning elements were being dropped off more and more local authorities. So why are we funding community organisations to keep, you know, come and harangue us right? We need five services, let them do services and that’s it. So, you’ve atomised the community, you’ve told people you’re dealing with it, but of course there’s no threat to you. And we, we stood out for a very, very long time terms of- and then, you know, there was a big political difference where, I mean, Unmesh has err, err I suppose our interpretation would be we were an independent community organisation and whilst there were people, many different political views in it, we were not a conduit or a platform for people who wanted to move into the Labour party and that the organisation would not endorse, and would not take actions that would err, that would help do that. I mean and, and that was a, a serious sort of political fissure and those in the local authority used it as a, as an excuse to then attack the organisation, saw it as being at a vulnerable moment and tried- and used it to try and close down the organisation. Erm, on the most stupidest of grounds. Like, you’re not giving value for money because you buy new sugar and toilet paper from the corner shop rather than the super market when it’s ten pence cheaper. Yeah, ‘cos we’re a community organisation, we’re going to buy everything from our local, we’re not gonna’ go and buy it from the- But it was all, it was a, it was then the XXX (55:20) I mean we knew that there was a, always been a, a sort of growing, and strong reaction from people in the local authority who really resented this upstart of an organisation that was challenging on housing, on literally everything, education, on housing and saying you’re not fit for purpose. You’re not good enough and haranguing councillors, haranguing officers, you know, and going to meetings and having sit down protests in the housing department and you know, so of course there was a lot of people like- just getting rid of this organisation. So they used it and erm, our building burnt down erm, miraculously just as while our cuts took place, so I mean, otherwise we would have occupied the building and, and tried to carry on. Our primary objective was maintain our service to the community, we, we you know, redirected our err, our emergency line and people worked erm, for a year without any funds, err and then we slowly rebuilt erm, and got not local authority funding, some funds from some trusts, some foundations and carried on work for, about another ten, ten, ten years. Erm, where I think it’s, it’s really and… the, it… you know, it closed down I suppose in the f- because partly some of the issues we were so successful at in terms of in Newham that our, around racist violence and on policing actually, you know, yes there were still issues but you know, this was not for most people the experience was not something now that they, they had so… you know, the new challenges were more erm. So we were very strong on the war on terror for example, we engaged a lot, we did the Forest Gate shootings, and supported the families there. So we’ve always stood- and we did a lot in trying to highlight the civil liberty attacks on what the war on terror meant, what suspect community- how criminalising the Muslim community during the war, and all of those things. But by the end I think it needed erm, it needed err… a step back to think about what was going on and the needs of our community and we were always set up for the needs of our community, so I would say, as a, as a building it closed. But as activism and NMP people were, most of us still live in Newham, most of us are still active, most of us support our community in many, many different ways and some of us are do it also at a global level or a national level, but still very much with the same politics. It’s about communities on the front line, it’s there reality, so it should shape your politics, and as activists we will serve our community and serving our community means, you know, being- standing, standing with them, not above them, and all of that kind of stuff so, yeah.

*Erm, I know you’re obviously involved in organising anti-Trump protests.*

Mhm.

*How do you see the current status of, kind of, fascism and sort of, racism in national, local and global politics?*

I think we’re in a, we’re in one of those moments, again, erm where you really err, need to look back and look at the lessons of some of our struggles erm, so when you look at a, at a global level we see of course this rise of the far right and authoritarianism and it’s taking place all over the world, and it unites, you know, of course Trump in the US, it’s Modi in India, it’s- It’s very similar and it’s walls, fences and these are all in the context of multiple crisis that we face so, say you know, we’re facing in a crisis of neoliberalism, inequality. So, and exasperated by climate change from everything that’s a resource. And these are all depriving more and more people to the right of a dignified life. Now the only way you’re able to maintain that is actually if you really talk about othering people, and therefore racism mutates to, not simply being about you know, erm some historical experience of, of er white communities and all those, or black community or- but actually becomes a really central part of most politics in the sense of you’re, it’s the, it’s how the world is respon- responding to these crises. And in that of course, more and more governments are, are, instead of challenging that narrative, are playing the race card. Which is why we still argue it in the eighties and the nineties: that the right, far-right will grow. When you have mainstream politicians saying, and normalising what the BNP or the Front National, or the Northern League, or the Austria Freedom Party, what all of these people are saying: and it’s exactly proven true. Because all of those parties are now saying why vote for them, right? Vote for the real thing, and once you’ve normalised their agenda, then they’re able to construct this heady mix of, which is, talk about inequality and injustice, make of course, as a white working class communities, it’s white communities – feeling the brunt of neoliberalism and austerity. Play to your feeling of white identity, and this idea that that’s under threat err, and have a really easy scapegoat. And it’s the Muslims and the immigrants, and err- So I think we’re at err, we’re at the, at the stage where all the hallmarks of, of a consistent fascist revival are there, right? The idea that we’re not talking about right wing but actually fascistical, neo-fascistic parties are now in government in so many countries, or lead the polls, or have a huge influence over the mainstream parties, you know. Yesterday I was reading Der Linke, the German left party is now going to start talking about German jobs for German workers, I mean this, this is all moving right. When Denmark says you know, if you live in a certain area and you commit a crime you can have a, a supplement punishment to your- to the normal tariff, because this is err to enable integration, erm, err because err, these communities are living in ghettos, so this will force those in ghettos to move out of ghettos. Not actually poverty or inequality, and er, well Austria, helping a refugee is a criminal offence, or in Italy you can turn your boards back and allow- Things that they said, they used to say: oh, it’s not going to happen, black knights, exaggerating, liberal democracy, Europe will never be this far right, they’re only fringe, they’re only going to ever be on the street and physically threaten us, and we said no. It’s actually about their ability to, to- it’s a combination of institutional racism and their ability to influence mainstream political discourse which is as frightening as their ability to be on the street. And I think if we look at the free Tommy Robinson campaign being bankrolled by US foundations; when we see Steve Bannon talking about a new, far-right international; when you see literally every mainstream party saying roughly the same kind of things about immigration and detention, and about Muslim- and, and you know, you’ve seen it on the front pages of every Daily Express and Daily Mail. And of course they’re all saying the same thing, it’s the Muslim, it’s the Muslims, it’s the immigrants. So no surprise that twenty-four per cent people said- forty per cent people said they would vote for a far-right, a right-wing party more right-wing than the Tories right? So it’s like, we’re living in a- we’re increasingly living in a polarised world. To me it feels like, you know, that seventies moment right, where, what is the response going to be: is it that all mainstream parties would capitulate to that and move themselves to the right, which of course is very likely, or will there be a really challenge, and now, interestingly enough, more and more people are coming back and saying we need NMP to exist again, we need that politics to exist again, new young black radicals- ‘Cos I’ve been involved in black dissonance, and Black Lives Matters, and there’s a whole new generation of young, black activists rediscovering that and saying that’s the kind of politics we need to have. The idea of community resilience, community self-organisation, being routed in our communities, and being there and bringing ourselves and our skills to, to support our communities. Yeah. So do you mind just waiting one minute? I just have somebody through here I just need to…

[RECORDING PAUSES]

-Right in there, anti-trump stuff we were trying to talk much more about, it’s not just about one bigot, it’s about Trumpism, it’s about politics, and that politics is growing everywhere and so our resistance has got to be less about the individual and more about the substantive cornerstones of this which is economic inequality, anti-migrant, anti-Muslim racism wrapped up in bigotry, but feeding off you know, crisis that are actually very real and err, and you know, and err, err reflect the fact that I actually, there is huge inequality in this country, and of course there’s left behind people. Erm, just clipping back but, Burnley’s famous for – apart from its great football team, I’m a big fan, which I only used to be the only non-white face on the whole of the terraces, which was a scary, scary experience- I used to watch Burnley play from the away fans, never from the home fans because it was too racist to watch in the home fans, erm the, the Burnley hooligan fans, Suicide Squad, were notoriously affiliated with the far-right – erm, but Burnley had race riots in two thousand and one as well, and we elected thirty BNP councillors in Newham, and this also spoke partly to all this history of violence and racism and my parents were still living in Burnley and I was there during the riots but it also spoke to a deep frustration amongst white working class communities that had just been ignored. Been ignored by the establishment, ignored by the local authority, and just left. And so it was much as an anger from them about everything else as it was, but it was just easy to direct it as, at the- look at the Asians, they’re getting that, it’s the Asians, it’s Muslims, it’s the Pakis, blah, blah, blah. And it, and of course that’s very much part of what Trumpism is doing, what Modi’s doing, what everybody else is doing.

*Yeah, erm excellent, well I think really my final sort of question is, if we could go back and discuss a bit about how you became involved in, or aware of the work that SubCo was doing. Would you mind explaining a bit about that please?*

Sure, sure. You know, I mean as a I said there was a, in Newham there was a, it was a very vibrant moment where people were coming together, really trying to think about what were the needs of our community. And how the, and what the relationship was and what would err, what was needed. So out of that period you know, out of Newham Monitoring Project people were involved in NMP went on to set up Newham Asian Women’s Project, the local refuge and the women’s organisation now called London Black Women’s Project. Out of around that set of people, people were very- some of the same people and some people who shared- set up Eastwood’s Trust, were looking at err, err advice. And then, you know, and out of that people were also talking about housing and the needs of elderly and did, and so it was a very much like, oh, these are all great needs, alright how can the community infrastructure of these progressive organisations support that? And people who were on management committees would, you know, would be involved in, in creating the new management committee. A lot of times where people thinking about how to put bids together they were, you know, we were able to share a lot of experience and oh, we’ve got contacts here and we could do this, and using our political influence and our community influence in support of each other. So for example, when we had pickets, the Gujarati Welfare Association would, people would go and pick the Gujarati Welfare Association, they’d come and picket – all these elderly Gujaratis. We’d go to Hibiscus, which was the elderly African-Caribbean elderly centre and they’d come. And we’d go to Stardust, which would be the youth centre, so when Stardust was being closed down there’d be- we’d be there with them on the youth campaign, and when Gujarat welfare and the housing elderly, er the needs of the elderly, and they were being ignored in social services, we were there ‘cos we- and it was this reciprocal, because people saw themselves as we’re all part of this community, and we’re fighting for community assets, we’re fighting for community needs. And, and so SubCo really sort of emerged out of that, of that mo- that moment and really identified there was a need that was going to be ground-breaking, it was going to go out there and you know, and really err just as we’d done on race, they’d do on housing, they would do on that, they would be I suppose, you know, something to- for other people around the country to emulate and err, of course, subsequently they were. They were sort of, they were a hugely, for the time, that idea you know, err was, was innovative.

*Did you have any erm, official sort of involvement with them through your own work or was it more sort of-?*

We knew many of the people. Like I said, the people who worked for SubCo, the people who were in charge of the events that SubCo did, we would support, we would go to, we would lobby, we would be supportive and vice versa. Erm, er and you know, same political circles of people were, were there and when people worked for SubCo as, as workers you know, and were getting it off the ground, you know we were all in the same community centre, we were in the same advice centre, so it was always like, so what do you need? Oh yeah, I know how to do that. So it was very practical support I was giv- we were, you know, because we were all in the milieu. While there was other people around management committees and supporting them in terms of management committee but we saw it as, as there is a network of family or, you know, we’re family. We’ve got this mosaic of organisations that support each other, that are a part of this vibrant infrastructure that makes Newham, despite all of its terrible things, this incredible place because it’s, there’s a political vibrancy around it and creativity.

*Excellent, erm I think-*

That was a long, rambling sort of-

*Yeah no, it’s been really interesting so thank you for your time.*

**The End**

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