

Sus

Organ of the Steering Committee
BPOCAS

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Black Organisations Launch

CAMPAIGN AGAINST SUS

WEDNESDAY, 1 February 1978, will remain a memorable day in the history of black people in Britain. It was on this day that the Black People's Organisations Campaign against Sus (BPOCAS) was formed, as an umbrella organisation for many black groups, and, together with a number of other groups, Barristers and Solicitors, launched the 'sus' campaign which publicly called for:-

- 1. The repeal of Section 4 of the 1824 Vagrancy Act, commonly known as 'sus', under which the police can arrest anybody as a 'suspected person loitering with intent to commit a felonious offence.'
- 2. An independent inquiry into police-black relations.

Nearly 200 people were at the public meeting held at John Evelyn School, Deptford, SE8. Speakers included Alex Lyon, MP, and Claudius Johnston, black youth student. The campaign was initiated by the West Indian-African Community Association whose members were concerned about the oppressive nature of the legislation, the repressive manner in which the police are using it, and the depressive environment of the black community generally.

Below are extracts from speeches made at the meeting by Paul Boateng of the Paddington Law Centre and the Reverend Basil Manning of the North Lewisham Project. The first speaks of police repression and how to fight it, the second of psychological effects of arrest on black youths and the concern of the black community.

Paul Boateng:

"It is right that this campaign should be concerned about repealing the Vagrancy Act, that we should make contact with people like Alex Lyon, and that we should be aware of what political muscle we have to alter the Act, but we must not forget that even if the Act is gone, the problem of the police is there.

"So even if we get rid of sus, what we have to face with our own community at the same time as supporting this campaign and fighting for the repeal of this Act, is how we are going to cope with the problem of the police, how we are going to organise

ourselves to defend our youths, how we are going to react as a community when our youths are harassed, beaten and are picked up in the streets.

"We've got to learn, as a community, how to come together and how to fight these cases. I hope that you will give some time to discussing this Act this evening because we have two very distinguished black members of the Bar here, Ron Rose and Rudy Narayan who, time and time again, have been in the front line defending black youths, who have put the reputation of their careers on the line for our black people. It is very important that we know how to organise our defences, how to organise our community to give our youths support, and to show the



police that, never mind the sus Act, if they attack our community, we are not going to lie down and let them do it."

Basil Manning:

"The other thing which is brought up by the police when representations have been made on this Act is that they need this Act on the statute books because it prevents crime; it is there to do preventative work. As some people have already said in this room tonight, instead of doing preventative work, it seems to us that it creates a criminal class

and a feeling of despair in the minds of some youngsters who, in fact, may end up as criminals.

"I remember counselling a 10-year-old boy from a local school some time last year and, do you know, the thing he was most interested in was 'detention centre' and how he could get in there and what it was like. It had become a cult in his mind because of his daily experiences of what was happening to him and his mates. Or a 14-year-old who would say to me: 'What are you on about Basil? How can you tell me that it is not a place to do this or that, or how can you tell me that we must try and change things when even if I do absolutely nothing, time and again they will pick me up? And if they continue to pick me up for nothing, I might as well do something, in order that they can pick me up for something.' That is a point which you may remember and I am just echoing. This is the one law where, it seems to me, that you are guilty unless proved innocent. You are guilty because you are black, in many cases, and the disproportion amongst the number of people who are picked up on sus are in fact black.

"I have no illusions about the black community's response to the question of crime. I think our response is clear. And when I have spoken to parents and the West Indian-African Community Association, time and time again they have said: 'If our children have in fact committed an offence, then the police are here to do a particular job.' That is what the people in the black community are saying. But we do take exception to the fact that time and again our youngsters are being picked up for absolutely nothing.

"But this is not happening all in the black community. It seems to me that it is happening in a context of deprivation and of discrimination. This law came in, I am told by historians, in another era of deprivation, that is, after the Napoleonic Wars. It was used then to pick up people, and it was used again very heavily in the 30's. It seems to me now, in a time of high unemployment and with all the deprivation in the inner cities, that it is being used against the black community."



Call to repeal Vagrancy Act

AT a public meeting held on 23 May at the Metro Club in West London, resolutions calling on the Home Secretary, Mr Merlyn Rees, for the urgent repeal of the Vagrancy Act of 1824, section 4, dealing with sus, and for initiating an immediate inquiry into police-black relations were unanimously passed. Paul Boateng, Barrister, was in the Chair.

Sus Law in the melting pot

LABOUR MP, Arthur Latham, informed the meeting that he had received a written reply the previous day from the Minister of State for the Home Office, Brynmor John, in which she said that the Government had accepted in principle the recommendations of the 1976 Working Party on Vagrancy and Street Offences and intends to see 'suitable legislative opportunities' in the present parliament. The Working Party had talked about an alternative offence of sus even if the Vagrancy Act is repealed. At the moment many MPs, law officers, and others are in favour of having a lesser offence of sus and one which requires stronger proof.

Mr Latham thought that the sus campaign now launched is timely and whether or not a new government is elected in the next twelve months or so, some attempt will be made to amend the law on sus. He pointed out the need, in addition to the public hearings planned by the campaign, for a serious lobby of individual MPs by both black and white groups concerned not only with sus but also with civil liberties.

A black mother raps sus

MRS STREDWICK, a black mother of Kensal Rise, and a valiant fighter for children and young people throughout London, spoke bitterly against the use of the sus charge by the police to arrest black youths and 'earn promotion'. Her family has suffered a great deal in the hands of the police. She spent months trying to get one of her sons free of the charge of sus when the son was nowhere near the incident he was charged with. Her younger son was convicted with sus in spite of overwhelming evidence against such a charge.

Exaggeration

CECIL GUTZMORE: 'Horrible, terrible things are happening. Young kids being kicked senseless in police stations, being kicked senseless on the streets. It's not just the sus that we are concerned with. It's the whole evil, rotten system that you can't tell the truth about because the people like Arthur Latham, and all those left-wing MPs, and all those liberals who are supposed to believe in equality, who are supposed to believe in a fair police force, who are supposed to believe in justice, absolutely refuse to accept the evidence that I know is true, the evidence that I can stack up and put before them, and they would always say: 'You are a master of exaggeration, Mr Gutzmore.' Now that is the situation in which we are. Our friends are just like our

enemies because they refuse to do what our friends ought to do. They ought, at least, to accept that we know the truth, that something terrible and rotten and horrible is going on in this society in the relationship between black people and the police, and that something ought to be done about it as a matter of urgency. That, above all, the truth of what is going on has got to be allowed to see the light of day.'

No Bar career for sus victim—says magistrate

VITUS EVANS, a sus victim, convicted on his first appearance in the Magistrates' Court, was later told by the magistrate that he could not pursue a legal career because of his conviction. He was at the time studying for three 'A' levels and OND. Vitus told the meeting that the magistrate had seen the character references from his course tutors and later came to him to inquire what he intended to do when he got his qualifications, and he answered that he hoped to become a Barrister. However, his appeal to the Crown Court was successful.

Sus in the media

IN a BBC *Nationwide* programme last April, Alex Lyon, MP, stressed that unless the sus law was repealed there would always be conflict between the black community and the police. London Weekend Television also made a programme around the issue of sus in February. Sus has also been aired on radio and given coverage in national, local and community newspapers throughout the country.

Public hearings

A SERIES of public hearings about sus is planned to take place in a number of community centres around London, starting next July. Each hearing would be conducted by a lawyer and people would be invited to give evidence of their experiences which could be written down.

Black women's group

THE United Black Women's Action Group held a public meeting on sus in April at the West Green Community Centre, N15. Norman Atkinson, MP, spoke at the meeting which was well attended.

The Steering Committee, BPOCAS, welcomes letters, news items, cuttings, reports, press releases, photographs, cartoons, relative to sus and police-black relations.

Postbag

HERE is £25.00 which I hope you will be able to find a use for.

Could you send me a few badges and posters? I'd like as many badges as you can spare (say 50) so that I can distribute them as widely as possible—also a petition form if you have any. I think your campaign is one of the most important there is and I wish you every success with it.

Good luck!

MICHAEL MOORCOCK
London W11

PS Keep in touch, I'll send more money as I can afford it.

PLEASE send me 24 STAMP SUS OUT badges. I enclose a postal order for £2. If you could send me some posters as well, I will put them in my club for the brothers to see. Thank you.

GRANT ST JOHN
Nr Bexley Heath
Kent

AS a one time resident in Brixton, I was delighted to see that at last attempts are being made to organise some sort of campaign to repeal the Vagrancy Act as it affects black youths via the sus charge. I'd be really grateful if you could send me as many details as possible about what's going on. And also offer any ideas as to how you might wish a group of people in Cambridge to operate; presumably making the Law Faculty of the University aware of the issue might be a starting point?

Very best wishes for all that you are doing.
YULIAN VILES
Cambridge

AT the Annual General Meeting of NAPO (Probation officers' union) attended by over 600 people, I moved a resolution on Sus and it was passed overwhelmingly—it reads:

This Association opposes the continued use of 'suspected person' charges (under s4 of the Vagrancy Act 1824) believing such charges to be unsound in principle, open to abuse in practice and thus contrary to natural justice—we resolve to campaign with other interested groups to secure this reform of the law.

Please let me know of future campaign meetings. I am sorry I am unable to attend the meeting on 23rd.

Greetings.

ROSALIE WATSON
Southall
Middx

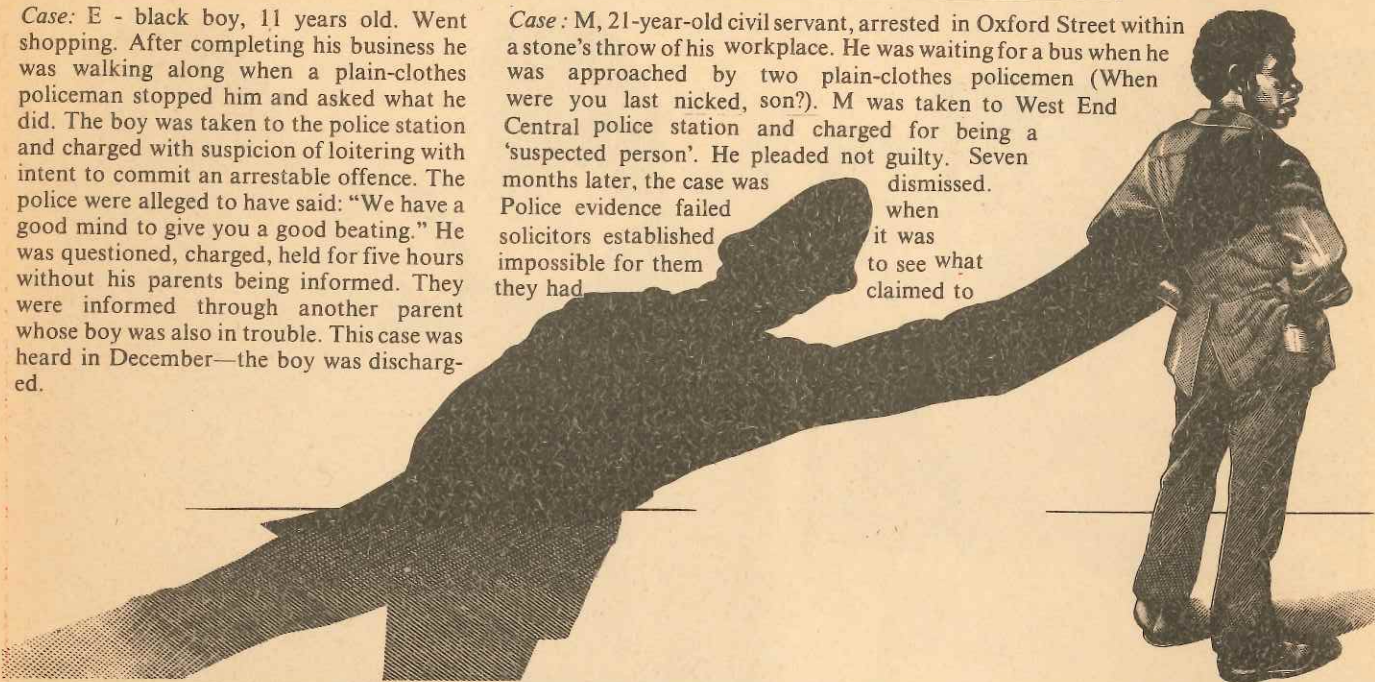
Sus casebook

A Black Researcher, in liaison with the Black People's Organisations Campaign Against Sus and other supportive groups, is assembling evidence to be presented to the Royal Commission on Criminal Procedure. We would like to hear from youths, parents,

professional persons, and others in the black community around London who have had good or bad experience with the police. Please contact BPOCAS, c/o 206 Evelyn Street, Deptford, London SE8 5RZ. Telephone 01-692 7568.

Case: E - black boy, 11 years old. Went shopping. After completing his business he was walking along when a plain-clothes policeman stopped him and asked what he did. The boy was taken to the police station and charged with suspicion of loitering with intent to commit an arrestable offence. The police were alleged to have said: "We have a good mind to give you a good beating." He was questioned, charged, held for five hours without his parents being informed. They were informed through another parent whose boy was also in trouble. This case was heard in December—the boy was discharged.

Case: M, 21-year-old civil servant, arrested in Oxford Street within a stone's throw of his workplace. He was waiting for a bus when he was approached by two plain-clothes policemen (When were you last nicked, son?). M was taken to West End Central police station and charged for being a 'suspected person'. He pleaded not guilty. Seven months later, the case was dismissed. Police evidence failed when solicitors established it was impossible for them to see what he claimed to



Other news

Move towards police state

THE recommendations recently of the Commons Select Committee report on Race Relations and Immigration will, if fully implemented, openly create a police state in Britain. The report suggests that sanctions be taken against employers who knowingly employ people who overstay their permitted time and who enter the country illegally. It also recommends that an independent inquiry be set up to consider the system of internal control of immigration.

These suggestions and recommendations contain sinister implications. They mean registers and identity cards on top of dossiers which are daily being compiled on immigrants and natives alike. Already cases have been reported of employers being asked by the police to furnish complete lists of black workers for a check on their status. Dawn raids by police and Home Office officials are frequent occurrences in the black community. In one instance, a sick black woman was dragged by the hair screaming from her flat, bare-footed, without her coat, and subsequently deported for being an illegal immigrant. Her status was never proved in court.

Obviously, the Select Committee Report aims for a tougher policy on immigration. But it is racist. It feeds and fans the fears of racist extremists headed by Enoch Powell and the National Front, that white people in this country are being 'swamped' by coloured immigrants. In fact, the report is

not concerned with numbers of immigrants, since most of these are white and have automatic entry, but with coloured people holding United Kingdom Passport who may wish to come to Britain and bring some members of their families. It seeks to break up black families, thereby stirring up racial hostility and denying black people fundamental human rights. Registers, identity cards and dossiers are clear signs that the birth of the police state will not be long.

Tories against blacks knowing their rights

THE newly elected Conservative Council in the London Borough of Wandsworth have issued warnings to community development groups and law centres that they face cuts in financial support, advisory powers and staffs if they continue taking part in political activities. These include helping black people especially in understanding the problems of sus.

Rights on arrest

LEWISHAM Council for Community Relations is running a 'help on arrest' scheme in co-operation with the local police. Anyone arrested or taken into custody in Lewisham will automatically receive a leaflet prepared by the LCCR informing them of their rights, and how to get help from a civil rights adviser. Asquith Gibbes, the Senior

Community Relations Officer, thinks that this is the first time that such a scheme has been put into operation in Britain.

Commenting on the scheme, Commander Maurice Taylor, Head of P Division, said: "This scheme should go a long way towards dispelling any apprehension or fears which people may have when detained at a police station. Our aim is to see that prisoners are dealt with fairly and according to law, and I welcome the assistance of the civil rights advisers in demonstrating to the public that this objective is achieved."

Diary

• JUNE 3 - United Black Women's Action Group - sus campaign social at Tottenham Community Project, 628 High Road, Tottenham, N17. Sounds of Sir Burns and Dubsetta Hi-fi. Afro-Carib foods. 8 pm till late

• JUNE 12 - Merseyside Anti-Racist Alliance. Public meeting on sus at Stanley House Community Centre, Liverpool 8. At 8pm.

• JUNE 15 - The Albany, Creek Road, Deptford, SE8. Benefit evening for the Black People's Organisations Campaign Against Sus. Reggae and Rock, featuring MISTY, ATV and the REALISTS. Starts 8.30 till late.

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TWO policemen, the Reverend Basil Manning (hidden by policeman on the right, but Afro hair still showing) and Chris Orlick, Welfare Rights Worker, discuss 'sus' in front of a sus stall manned by Mavis Clarke, Community Worker, during a recent festival in Deptford organised by All Lewisham Campaign Against Racism And Fascism.

AFFILIATION to BPOCAS is open to organisations and individuals who support the aims and objectives of the Sus campaign. Subscription rates are:- Organisations £2, Individuals £1. Donations are welcome. Please enrol

Name

Organisation

Address

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as an affiliate member to the Black People's Organisations Campaign Against Sus. I/We enclose a Cheque/Postal Order for £ (and/or a donation of £)

Signed..... Date

Please return to:- BPOCAS c/o West Indian-African Community Association, 206 Evelyn Street, Deptford London SE8 5RZ. Telephone 01-692 7568