

# Skinheads on the March

Attacks in Kitchener have anti-racists worried

BY **STUART DUNCAN**

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Kitchener-Waterloo -- The second-floor meeting room at the Spot is supposed to be a retreat for local street kids, activists and young people. In recent months, however, the youth centre has been the target of attacks by the Tri-City Skins, a loose coalition of militant neo-Nazi skinheads living throughout the region.

Gangs of up to a dozen skinheads, often in Nazi-inspired regalia, have made a habit of crashing the hangout -- usually after a night of drinking at a nearby watering hole. Anti-racist activists have been the most frequent targets.

While the presence of such groups has dwindled in larger metropolitan areas like Toronto and Ottawa, their scattered remnants seem to be alive and well in this pocket of southern Ontario.

Besides the attacks at the Spot, white rights brochures have been turning up regularly at bus stops, local high schools and other public spaces. Local white-rightists have also been involved in disrupting Gay Pride activities in nearby London. Watchers of the far right report underground white power concerts in the area as well.

Recently, a member of another neo-Nazi offshoot known as the Canadian Ethnic Cleansing Team was arrested for posting death threats on the Internet after the September 11 attacks.

The offending missive counsels attacking "B'nai Brith offices, Mossad temples and any Jew (or) Arab temple, building, house and cars. There are no innocent Jews especially in a time of war."

Another member of the group has also been linked to a beating incident of a black man on the TTC in Toronto. A third group, the anti-immigration Canadian Heritage Alliance, has also sprung up in the K-W area.

Canadian Jewish Congress executive director Bernie Farber, a long-time observer of the far right, cautions against making too much of the heightened activity.

The terrorist attacks in the U.S. are precisely the kind of events that groups on the right have traditionally used as occasions for asserting their often virulent brand of politics.

"The fuel that's needed for white supremacist activity or its growth is instability within society," Farber says.

On the other hand, Amelia Golden, who's been monitoring the situation for B'nai Brith, is more alarmed. She says there have been neo-Nazi attacks in the area over the past couple of years, and recruitment is on the upswing.

"These groups are certainly not isolated in their views."

Golden says some of the old faces involved in the Heritage Front, the most active white rights group in Canada throughout the 90s, have taken up the cause in K-W and the surrounding area.

In the view of some of the youth who've been the targets of recent attacks, police have been slow to rein in the groups.

Staff sergeant Gary Askin says police have been "monitoring" the situation and have instituted a no-gang-colours policy to deter the groups from entering the city's core in Nazi wear.

But, he says, "we cannot go out and arrest them or seize their computers based on their beliefs." Others argue that this police approach borders on complacency.

"This is not a gang issue," says anti-racism activist Davin Charney, part of the collective at the Spot. "Monitoring is not good enough," says Charney, when people are being assaulted and there's ample evidence of hate literature being distributed in the area.

Until recently, the Walper Pub, a local watering hole, has been a popular hangout for skinheads. Bar staff report skins in full Nazi regalia drinking themselves into a stupor at the bar, then heading out later to look for trouble at the Spot.

There's new management at the bar, and the skins are still hanging out. But now, bartenders say, the number of drinks they get is tightly controlled.

Alex Krause, a member of the Canadian Ethnic Cleansing Team who runs the server that the Tri-City Skins et al. use to run their Web sites, is reluctant to get into a detailed discussion of the activities of any of the groups -- except to say that they use the Internet to network. "We're not opposed to anybody," he says. "We just do our own thing."

According to Matt Lauder, anti-racism director for the Guelph and District Multicultural Centre, renowned racist Paul Fromm has been something of a regular fixture in the area. He's spoken at a number of recent events.

Says Lauder, the meetings are more than just information sessions, and serve as networking opportunities for a broad array of extremists -- Holocaust revisionists, far-rightists and free speech advocates, including the Canadian Heritage Alliance.

The latter group claims to be just opposed to immigration. However, there is a racist tinge to some of its views. One article posted on its Web site poses the question, "When is a Jew a Jew?"

The Alliance's participation in a regional Adopt-a-Road program made headlines that led embarrassed city officials to pressure the group to remove their sign. The group has also been active on the campus of Sir Wilfrid Laurier University, where a frontperson for the organization is a fourth-year student. The group declined to comment when reached by NOW.

Observers say the Alliance has been taking its cue from some of the usual suspects on the right, Fromm in particular. Fromm, though, is quick to distance himself from the attacks at the Spot. "I didn't ask anybody to go and punch anybody out," he says.

Ottawa-based lawyer Richard Warman has filed a formal complaint with the federal human rights commission against the Tri-City Skins and the Canadian Ethnic Cleansing Team, alleging the wilful promotion of hate.

*Additional reporting by Enzo Di Matteo*

# Who Says it was a Riot?

Stuart Duncan

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In the summer of 2000, on the grounds of the Ontario legislature, the landscape of political action in the province changed. Welfare cuts, the Safe Streets Act and the gutting of the Tenant Protection Act were but a few aspects of the Conservative agenda that created a situation that was on the verge of explosion.

June 15: thousands of people joined the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (**OCAP**) to demand the right to be heard. The crowd breached a set of barricades erected in front of Queen's Park. Stunned police scrambled for control. Using horses, pepper spray and batons, the police repeatedly charged the crowd and indiscriminately brutalized people. With any crude instrument they could find, the crowd fought back.

In the melee, dozens of protestors were injured. Broken bones, bruises and scratches were common; a doctor told one woman who suffered a concussion that the bike helmet she had been wearing saved her life.

For those who took part in the protest, the years of passivity in the fight against Tory attacks were over. After the demonstration, Toronto Police Staff Sergeant Brian O'Connor remarked, "There was a fury in these people, an intensity, that I've never experienced."

During the action and in the months following, over three-dozen participants in the June 15, 2000 demonstration were arrested. They face charges ranging from assault police to participation in a riot. Almost two years later, many of those court cases have just begun.

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As larger, more effective movements against neoliberal forces have developed, police and government have stepped up their attempts to quash these activities. Infiltration, arbitrary arrests and lengthy detentions have become the norm. The **APEC inquiry** revealed what members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) were willing to do in order to keep an eye on political activists. Police documents and the inquiry hearings revealed how the RCMP had sat in on meetings, participated in demonstrations and planned to arrest key protest organizers.

In Toronto, OCAP's supporters have increasingly attracted this kind of attention. An article published in one of the city's weeklies, *eye* magazine, revealed how, even before the Queen's Park protest, OCAP members were being watched. According to *eye*, Toronto's intelligence unit routinely infiltrated the group's meetings, harassed

OCAP members' families and monitored the movements of its supporters. After June 15, this type of surveillance was used to arrest other Queen's Park participants at demonstrations throughout the summer.

As well, both Toronto Mayor Mel Lastman and Police Chief Julian Fantino have used the press to demonize those who dare to fight the repressive polices of the provincial Tory government. Fantino characterized the march to Queen's Park as "domestic terrorism." When the Ontario Common Front, of which OCAP is a part, shutdown Bay Street in October, he said the coalition was an example of "organized crime at its finest." Lastman has repeatedly called members of OCAP thugs, animals and bullies.

In the months leading up to the Summit of the Americas, members of the Anti-Capitalist Convergence (CLAC) in Montreal became very familiar with this type of smear. Mark Mackinnon wrote in *The Globe and Mail* that the CLAC was "intent on violence at the Summit" and that their members could be bringing explosives to Quebec City. "Both in mainstream papers and in other sources that you would expect to be more sensitive to the reality of protest, CLAC was openly referred to as a violent group," states CLAC member Jaggi Singh. "That innuendo is used to marginalize people."

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The outcome of the June 15 trials could have sweeping effects on the radical left, as they decide the fate of this group of militant community organizers. "The state could draw the conclusion that the blow that they delivered to OCAP was completely successful and worked beautifully," states OCAP organizer John Clarke. "Then those kinds of measures that shutdown an organization they regarded as a thorn in the flesh, then there is no reason to imagine they wouldn't draw up plans to repeat the process again and again on a bigger and bigger scale."

Specifically, the jury trials of Clarke, Stefan Pilipia and Gaetan Heroux later in the fall could set dangerous legal precedents for future trials. Charged with Participating in a Riot and Counselling to Participate in a Riot, the three OCAP members could face lengthy prison sentences if found guilty.

On the other hand, the trials will also serve as a key opportunity to mount a legal challenge to police conduct at demonstrations. "We are planning to challenge the constitutionality of the Participating in a Riot section of the criminal code, and that would have an effect one way or the other," says Peter Rosenthal, legal counsel for John Clarke. "It shouldn't be constitutional to have an offence like that where you could just be standing around a big crowd and it is determined to be a riot and you are all of sudden guilty of an offence."

The arbitrary ability for police forces to declare any assembly a riot represents a dangerous escalation to many activists. "It could have huge impacts on picket lines, on what the definition of direct action plays out to be in people's daily lives. So many

working people would be drawn into such a broad definition of counselling to commit,” says June 15 defendant PJ Liley.

Despite police attempts to create divisions within the left regarding confrontational direct action, the defendants continue to receive a huge amount of community support. “We have a solid history of working with — and some of us being a part of — OCAP, and our fight and goals are the same,” says Cathy Crowe of the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee. OCAP’s focus on the local issues that directly affect the lives of Toronto’s poor is key to that support says Crowe.

According to Gaetan Heroux, “The oppression and the attacks that OCAP has been experiencing, is what the communities we work in and live in have been experiencing way before then. So when a group like OCAP comes into that community or into that context, what we found is that that voice is very very welcome.” Stressing the importance of building grassroots support is the source of OCAP’s effectiveness, and in many ways is the reason why the group is considered a threat to systems of power.

In recognizing how OCAP’s success is rooted in creating a strong community of resistance, members believe that the courts and the police have worked to destroy those community links. “So far in our convictions and the people who have served time, it’s been the most vulnerable,” explains Liley. “People of colour, people who are homeless, people who have AIDS, people who have addictions; these are the ones who they press the hardest and want to keep in jail longest and separate from the organization as well to break that social network.”

In the face of huge legal costs and endless court dates, the defendants continue to stress the importance of effective, confrontational organizing. “Do we, in the course of these trials, manage to build political momentum, support and confidence? And if we do, then we can use these as means to actually take the movement forward,” remarks Clarke. He adds, “I would be very happy to be sitting in jail if I knew that, in doing that, it was making a contribution to building the kind of movement that can actually fight to win.”

*Stuart Duncan is a media activist currently living in Guelph, Ontario. He has been working in various independent grassroots media organizations over the last year. He has hosted a weekly spoken-word show on CFRU-FM, Guelph’s campus and community radio station, focussing on social justice issues. Stuart is a member of the Peak Collective, the University of Guelph’s autonomous, democratic, volunteer-run alternative magazine. He is also a member of the Independent Media Centre (IMC) Ontario. Finally, Stuart has worked in the news department of Toronto’s Nowmagazine and freelances for Echo in Kitchener-Waterloo.*

### **Features : Music, arts and gentrification**

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*By Stuart Duncan*

The indie music and arts scene in Toronto has a common lament — that downtown has become a place where we can't afford to be. Rising rents shift us out of our familiar neighbourhoods, and our tiny stores, venues and galleries are gobbled up by condos and upscale retail development. We curse the commercialization of our former haunts, but what role have we played in the gentrification of these spaces?

In Toronto, as in most large urban centres, artists and musicians are part of cycle of cultural transformation, where the search for affordable places to live and work leads to the creation of artist enclaves in traditional working class neighbourhoods. This migration often makes neighbourhoods more attractive to developers, and upscale development displaces local shops and residents.

"There are lots of gallery owners who will gravitate to a particular area because there are lots of artists working in that area and you can turn it into a gallery district," states John Lorinc, author of 2006 urban affairs book *The New City*. "Then you get people who like to buy expensive art coming in there and they know a guy who develops condos. Then people who have the means to buy a \$400,000 semi say 'I like living near galleries, that is pretty cool.'"

Be it in the Annex, Yorkville or what we see currently in West Queen West, Toronto's emerging arts and music communities are often a catalyst for this type of development.

"I think that there are some artists who are complicit in gentrification practices without even knowing what gentrification is or the impacts of their actions," states urban planner Susannah Bunce (sister of Wavelength's Jonny Dovercourt). "Cute boutiques, cafes, quirky collector stores, galleries, juice bars — these are all stores that artists probably frequent more than the average working class guy, and these are the types of stores and services that, once multiplied, can lead to a distinct change in character of a neighbourhood. Here, the artist's eye for design gets rid of the shabbiness that is typically equated with a 'run-down' neighbourhood, and by doing so, aids gentrification practices."

But how do we work to fight against our role in the cycle of gentrification? Bunce believes that as an arts community we need to work to stop the impact of rising rents and costs of living in the downtown core. She cites policies of limiting the ability to rezone areas and caps on commercial rental rates as simple examples of what can be done to slow the rapid gentrification of traditional neighbourhoods.

Adrian Blackwell, artist and urban and architectural designer, believes we need to return to period of a greater discourse on the politics of art. "In the 70's, when artist run centres like YYZ, A Space and Mercer Union were being created, there was a real political dialogue about what was happening. There

was action around the problems of the arts community, its whiteness, its affluence and there was a lot of radical politics within it.”

When I ask Blackwell why he claims the art community has become more apolitical he responds, “The encroachment of the market and the gallery system has exponentially expanded in Toronto since the 80’s. There is this much wider net of market-driven institutions, people think they can make it big at any age, there are advantages in that it makes the youthful art scene more dynamic, but it really depoliticizes it.”

Like the art scene, indie culture has become increasingly entwined with big business, market-driven forces are infiltrating underground culture, and a scene that used to be about exciting cultural and social action is increasingly used to generate income. It is important for us to confront artists and spaces that are complicit in the commodification of culture and public space. We shouldn’t be afraid to criticize how The Drake continues to affect West Queen West and demand that our peers not play or support such a place.

As a group, musicians and artists have a lot of privilege, we have access to spaces and resources — be it photocopying, media contacts, bookers — that most of society doesn’t, and we need to do something with that privilege. The pool of creative skills that we have as a group is amazing, but we need to use it more to affect political change. We have to break out of the model of just throwing fundraisers for political causes and actively participate in those struggles, on a day-to-day basis and at grassroots level.

The Fifth Avenue Committee (FAC) in Brooklyn serves as an inspirational example of what Torontonians could do to preserve the character of their communities. Like many neighbourhoods in Toronto, upscale residential development was forcing many long-time residents to leave Brooklyn’s Park Slope neighbourhood. In response, the FAC declared 105 square blocks of Park Slope a Displacement Free Zone. When the FAC receives a request for assistance from a resident facing eviction, the committee works to fight the eviction and mobilize the community. In most cases, with the help of the FAC, landlords and tenants have been able to reach fair settlements.

The music and arts communities could be active participants in similar campaigns in Toronto. It is not difficult to find common struggles with the people around us — development that drive venues and gallery spaces out of a neighbourhood also force low income tenants and shop owners to find a new home — but we have to leave our comfortable scenes to do it.

“One of the really crucial things is that we think of the city more broadly. One of the problems is that certain arts communities that have access to certain media, are located in a certain space on the downtown west side of Toronto — then that becomes the subject of discussion,” Blackwell states. “The effects of gentrification are no longer just on the west side, the effects of the problem are felt across the whole city. We have to think creatively about how to not just access communities that are approximate, but how to think of Torontopia at a larger scale.”