

## Gathering place

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This transcription is from a workshop held at *Standing Up for Our Rights: European Citizens' Gathering*, organised by the *Retaining European Citizenship* initiative and the *Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice* at the University of Nottingham in November 2017.

*Jagdish Patel*

**'the climate had been set where people aren't seeing the links between hatred and what they see on a daily basis'**

The Brexit campaign wasn't about Brexit, wasn't about Europe. It was a shift to the right, using racism and nationalism. It was about a right-wing agenda. The impact of nationalism and racism ultimately leads to immigration controls, ultimately leads to more policing. This has an impact on the lives of Black and Asian communities. It is part of a long-term agenda starting in May 1954. In the 50s, when people first arrived here in large numbers, was when a lot of the far-right groups were set up. The White Defence League was perhaps the strongest of the parties. It was a huge movement, which ultimately led to the Nottingham riots in 1958. The riots began when a Black man was having a drink in a pub in the St Ann's area. Someone said something racist to him, he hit them, and this started the riots. For people unfamiliar with the history of anti-racist activity in Britain, there's a lot to know.

The rise in nationalism and racism is interlinked and has been for quite some time in this country. The slogan 'jobs for whites' has been going for some time. Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech in

1968 really pushed these questions high on the agenda and, even though Powell was sacked from the Shadow Cabinet, the Conservatives later introduced an *Immigration Act* in 1968, which is when they clearly defined that if you are Black or from the Commonwealth, then you're not welcome here. They pretty much stopped a lot of immigration, but alongside that the National Front grew.

By the early 1970s the National Front had 17,000 members and, by 1974, they were a large political force. In 1975, when John Tyndall took over, one of the things he said when a Black man was stabbed in Southall was 'one nigger down, one million to go'.

The theme underlying the work of The Monitoring Group is the role of the State. The State was always concerned about what would happen when the second generation of Black and Asian people grew up here. In the early to late 1960s, an Intelligence Committee report was drafted examining Black and Asian community groups and asking the question: what are we going to do when these people start campaigning for their rights? After the *Race Relations Act* of 1976, the State had plans to arrest activists and campaigners as a first step to quashing protest.

The movement in the 50s and 60s around 'keeping our towns white' led directly into fascism. It was challenged by a mixture of a vibrant cultural movement and campaigning on the streets, direct challenges and legal battles. Although things improved, the threat did not go away. The fascists are still around, and a lot of the issues are still around.

Derek Beacon was elected to Tower Hamlets Council for the British National Party (BNP) around the time of the Stephen Lawrence murder [in 1993]. Most people remember this murder but what has been forgotten is that the slogan 'jobs for whites' was being used and the attitude towards asylum seekers was absolutely hostile. The *Daily Mail*, one of the main perpetrators of the hostility at the time, continues to run hostile stories. This is important to remember because race hate is still an issue. When David Copeland – a former member of the BNP – bombed London [in 1999], there was a huge outpouring of people wanting to come together. It caused a huge amount of discussion in London about tackling the far right at the time.

Hostility towards asylum seekers from the early-2000s period onwards is really the beginning of the Brexit campaign. Between 2000 and 2006 there's an amazing statistic that one in four publications mention the words 'asylum seeker' in a negative way. This fostered the link in people's heads between crime, asylum and immigration, which had an impact nationally. If you look at the number of race hate crimes, you'll see that it suddenly

increases in this period. Remember that this is in the post-Lawrence campaign era.

The police remain much obsessed with anti-racists. The Herne Report [2014] shows that surveillance operations continue to be carried out against anti-racist campaigners.

It's important to mention that at the same time as the Labour Party were talking about multiculturalism in the 2000s, at the same time as they were 'celebrating' multiculturalism, at the same time that they were thinking about tackling race related crime (not racism), they were actually working with the right wing press. If you look at some of the Labour Party's 'grids' – which detail what news stories are going to be put out by the Party – from this period, you will see that they were working in conjunction with *The Sun* to perpetuate negative stories about immigration and asylum seekers. So there's this weird thing going on where they are undermining the far right by taking on a lot of the immigration agenda themselves and, at the same time, they're celebrating multiculturalism, which leads in the 2005 General Election to immigration taking centre stage. Hatred against asylum seekers turns into hatred against Muslims.

Nigel Farage arrives on the scene in the late 2000s, presenting himself as a 'man of the people' who will talk about things that other people will not talk about. He comes along but in fact the seeds had already been planted.

When Muhammed Saleem was murdered in Birmingham in 2013, he was murdered by a man who had also planted three bombs in mosques. His murder was never discussed as being an act of racism or terrorism. How things have changed between the time of David Copeland and today. It seems as if there's talk about Muslims in a certain way. When Dr Sarandev Bhambra was stabbed by a far right activist in Wales in 2015, it was hardly mentioned in the press in this country. When Jo Cox was murdered in 2016, people had become used to talking about far right activists carrying out murders but not linking it to the question of racism. The fact that Jo Cox's murder appeared to have little impact on the outcome of the Brexit referendum is actually shocking.

By that stage, the climate had been set where people aren't seeing the links between hatred and what they see on a daily basis. One of the reasons for that is because the State itself has lost interest. The Human Rights Commission has nothing at all, apart from one little report, on these questions. It's not part of the 'core agenda' anymore and a lot of what we've seen over the past decade is not only that the discourse on race has become a lot narrower, but a lot of support networks in the community are

disappearing. There are very few Race Equality Councils, very little campaigning going on, and the State has pretty much lost interest. All of this means that when Nigel Farage does or says something, he is condemned but little else is done. People have become used to it because it's been going on for such a long time. Boris Jonson and Michael Gove might condemn such behaviour when, just weeks before, they have done or said similar things. For example, the Leave campaign's propaganda on the prospect of Turkish immigration gave Farage and people like him the licence to say what they want.

Brexit support was largely about immigration because the Brexit campaign was all – or almost all – about immigration. Much research has been done on where Brexit support came from. A lot has been said about education levels and so on, but actually if you look at it most of the support for UKIP – for example – comes from places where there are very few overseas people living. This is the same place where the majority of the Leave campaign vote came from. The Leave campaign worked off the back of this anti-immigration agenda, which itself has been going on for the last decade or more.

It wasn't a massive surprise to us in The Monitoring Group that, after Brexit there was a big spike in racist incidents. What we refer to as 'racist incidents' are the figures that the police themselves are recording. The actual things that people are experiencing are probably ten times worse than this. The increase has continued. What's different now is that in the old days, such racist incidents would happen on the outskirts of big cities whereas now there have been big increases in city centres. It's now very much part of people's lives in the city centre, which is not surprising but which now means that more people than ever before are potential victims of the anti-immigrant, anti-asylum seeker, nationalistic and racist atmosphere that has been generated over the past decade and exacerbated by Brexit.

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*Suresh Grover*

**'We need to tell the story of what is going on. People need to see the impact and the dangers of what is going on. We have been given the biggest challenge of our lives.'**

I want to talk about post-Brexit, not because I think the past is not important – in fact, it is most relevant and there are important lessons we

can learn from the past to develop our strategy today over issues of xenophobia and racism. I actually feel quite uncomfortable talking about xenophobia because the nature of it post-Brexit is not about being distrustful of strangers, which I've never understood actually. In a globalised world which is so technologically advanced, I don't think there is anyone in Britain who is suspicious simply because something is strange. It's not like arachnophobia where someone is actually terrified of spiders. I think the language is wrong and it is actually very important to accurately describe the actual events and the experience of migrants and others. But I'll continue to use the word unless we can find a better one in the context of Brexit.

In order for us to work out a strategy for what to do next, it is necessary for us to work out the difference between Brexit, post-Brexit and pre-Brexit. In my view and in the view of people we work closely with, Brexit was a calamitous event. There can be no question about it. Brexit has opened a new chapter in our history. I think there are international dimensions that we need to discuss, which I can't do here, but I think the nature of the growth of nationalism, authoritarianism, as well as the development of social conservatism which impacts on women are felt very, very keenly in the modern world and it is a commonality between the election of Trump, people like Johnson, Gove and Farage, Geert Wilders, Le Pen and other radical right wing parties and movements. It's not just an issue of racism and nationalism in the UK, it has an impact in all sorts of different ways. It is the agenda of undiluted patriotism, mixed with nationalism, which is the most dangerous part.

Brexit isn't simply about immigration. I've been in the UK since 1965. I came here as a very young boy. Every election, apart from the 1997 election, has always been about immigration – or so I remember.

What is different is the use of social media and the use of a strategy where facts have no bearing on what is presented. There is a conscious approach to lying through this medium. One thing they know is that they have the emotional contact and connection between their particular political terrain and a large group of people.

What is also different about Brexit is the context of the negative impact of globalisation. There is a disconnection between working class people and communities, which have experienced a haemorrhaging of employment and jobs. Migrants for the first time are being blamed – not just Black immigrants – but migrants from Europe are being blamed for the social crisis in terms of housing and employment. 'We' are used to it, I've always been told that I've taken somebody's job. I've always worked

for The Monitoring Group, so I don't know who's job I've taken! This sort of racism has become 'normalised'. It's racist, but we've lived through it.

What's exceptional about Brexit is the global context and the European context, the demonization of migrants – but after a sustained attack and demonization of the working classes in this country, starting from Thatcherism and then Blair's agenda of taking neoliberal, right wing agendas on issues of law and order, immigration and the economy, which is a key thing that the Conservatives used to win on and which New Labour copied. In terms of the economy, you believe in austerity and balancing the books rather than resisting austerity. All of this has an impact. In terms of law and order, you strengthen the State rather than dilute power to other agencies which could be involved. We shouldn't have more policing, we should have less policing. Issues around alcohol and crime should be dealt with by prevention services and support services, not police forces. There are lots and lots of examples of this.

There is this consistent notion that crime is committed by migrants and Black people. There is disproportionate news and coverage of Black and migrants involvement with crime which creates a narrative in the population which feeds into racism.

Brexit has taken place in this context. In other words, there is a narrative and formation of opinions prior to Brexit which made the 'Remain' campaign's task especially hard. I was one of the few people who, from the outset, thought that Remain was going to lose, despite being a remainer myself. In the last two weeks of the campaign, remainers began to panic due to changes in the polls. Before that, everyone was confident that we wouldn't allow people like Nigel Farage to become part of the mainstream but, in fact, the mainstream had been created in the ten years before the vote without any opposition from the grassroots or the Labour Party in working class communities.

I don't want to stereotype working class communities. They are not a homogenous entity, they are heterogeneous. Some communities have a magnificent record of fighting against racism, which we know from the struggles against Apartheid, the cotton workers in the Lancashire mills who opposed slavery, etc. We know that there was resistance against colonialism from British workers. There have always been such examples and we know that in the Battle of Cable Street, when Oswald Mosley was defeated in East London, working class communities came out. But that engagement ended. There is a disconnection with the political elite, reduced chances of engaging with large numbers of working class communities that allowed people like Farage – a former stock broker – to

present themselves as insurgents on the side of the working class. He has no connection at all with the lived experience of the working class, but he gets away with pretending that he represents working class interests. How is that possible? It is because we on the left, progressive people, have also – like mainstream politicians – refused or did not engage with that constituency. So, in part, Brexit is our own doing and not just because of the right wing media. The sooner we learn this lesson and its consequences, the sooner we can begin to prepare a strategy for how to deal with the situation. We have told ourselves that we are good at campaigning. We can work out what the issues are, we are very strong when our backs are at the wall. Let me give you some examples. I coordinated the Stephen Lawrence campaign. Lawrence was a young guy, eighteen years old. He was killed in East London. The police said that there was no evidence to convict the suspects. The media started to take notice. There was no action from the Crown Prosecution Service to convict his murderers. We developed a campaign which involved legal and grass roots efforts, which created a new dimension in campaigning, which called for a public inquiry into this racist murder. The inquiry took place, which is unprecedented in British history. There had never been a public inquiry into a murder, let alone a racist murder. At the inquiry we had forty days of hearings, ninety-odd witnesses – including the suspects, the Commissioner of Police, etc. What did a High Court Judge and his advisor find? That the reason why the police failed to investigate the case properly was because they were institutionally racist. We had been talking about racism and institutional racism for a very long time.

Violent racism is built on the work of state and institutional racism. If politicians didn't talk about race in negative terms, there would be less violence on the streets. This is a known connection in politics. As soon as Farage, or Johnson or other people start to talk about it, there is an increase in racial violence. Every politician knows this. The Metropolitan Police showed evidence for this fact. Politicians know the consequences.

That inquiry was a momentous stage in race relations history, because it allowed for the first time an engagement with the population on the issue of race. I must have done four or five hundred meetings with the Lawrences throughout the country, from the very south of England to the Highlands of Scotland. Every meeting was full of people wanting to know what they could do. We had an enormous opportunity to engage but the government lost the opportunity. It moved away from an anti-racist perspective post-2000. It lost all of the opportunities to act on the question of hate crimes and racism. Policies developed by Blair and people like

David Blunkett – who spoke of ‘the enemy within’ as far as Muslims were concerned – focused elsewhere.

We now need a real, deep engagement at the grassroots level together with the use of social media with diverse models of communication. The second thing, which is critical, is unconditional support for those who are victims of incidents, whether they are xenophobic, racist, etc. Neither of these things have happened post-Brexit. We need to tell the story of what is going on. People need to see the impact and the dangers of what is going on. We have been given the biggest challenge of our lives.

The Monitoring Group went to the Rotherham area, which had exploded because of claims about the sexual abuse of children, where Pakistani men were seen to be people who groomed young girls. There is no doubt that there were individuals involved in such things. When that happened two years ago, every month the EDL [English Defence League] and others held demonstrations. The local Black and Asian communities were not allowed to go about their business. Mosques and shops were closed. It led to the murder of a 93-year-old grandfather named Mushin Ahmed who was simply going to the Mosque. He was beaten up and those who did it said in their statements that they murdered him simply because he was a Muslim and as revenge for the child sex abuse cases, although he played no part whatsoever in it.

For the first time, young Asians came out on the street. Before that, they were worried that if they came out there would be trouble and they would be picked up by the police. Lo and behold, they came out and the police charged them with violent disorder and conspiracy charges, which are almost akin to terrorist charges. When we went to Rotherham, people felt that they would never get justice. They thought that there would be an all-white jury who would simply look at them as Pakistani men and infer that they were guilty. We created a campaign, developed a legal strategy, arguing against the judge that we wanted one hour before delivering the defence statement to explain to the jury the context of racism. We challenged the judge and won. I have never seen a barrister, in my whole entire life – forty years of political life – give such a momentous, passionate speech about the context of racism in a courtroom. It brought tears to the eyes of the jury. Eleven of them were white, Rotherham residents, out of twelve jury members. The jury acquitted all twelve defendants. After the event, they came and spoke to us, they hugged us and asked why the police weren’t being charged.

If you are given the opportunity to explain in a rational, objective manner, and you can connect to people, and you have the facts and you are

being honest with them, you can actually have a real, live conversation of purpose with people. It doesn't matter where you are. This doesn't generally exist at the moment. Instead, what you have is a fantastic, new emergence in the Labour Party of young people. But they are involved in the structures of the Labour Party and their alliances only take place in terms of elections. They do not take place on a day-to-day basis. What we are dealing with are everyday forms of racism and xenophobia. It has to be tackled on a daily basis.

What we really need is a movement within and outside the Labour Movement, which connects migrants and Black and working class communities together. In the working class components there are migrants and Black people also. People forget that, but a large proportion of migrants are working people also. It can be done. We have seen where this has been done in areas like Nottingham, Rotherham and Manchester. If we work together on the basis of building those communities and building solidarity, if we reflect with them and reason with them, we can build a resistance against racism and xenophobia. Hard, grinding work. We have to be non-sectarian, we have to be open and transparent and we have to involve and be inclusive and respect people in issues of race, gender, etc.

I think there is another problem that we have and which we need to sort out within that family of resistance, solidarity and community. That is how Black communities view migrants and how migrants view Black communities. I helped the family of the Polish murder victim in Essex soon after the Brexit vote. Sections of the family were ostracised by sections of right wing Polish groups who didn't want any Black groups to come to the funeral. That sort of thing is an obvious problem if you consider what is happening in Poland. You shouldn't be surprised. There is a lot of distrust and stereotyping in Black communities about migrants also. We have to deal with that and deal with the stereotypes. We have to be honest.

The last thing I have to say is this: apart from racism, there is also a growth in religious fundamentalism. Different countries see this expressed in different ways. The French government does not believe in diverse culture. Their notion of secularism is a total and artificial separation of 'church and state'. I agree with notions of secularism. I think we should have no religion in politics. But we should respect the rights of people to be religious and they should be allowed to practise their religion. We must defend that right unequivocally. Anti-racist activity post-Brexit has to be on a 'rights based' agenda, where we do not compromise on women's rights, or children's rights, or religious rights. We can work together in that

framework. But we must also oppose the excess of religious extremism but from our own perspective, rather than a right wing agenda. We have been silent for too long on this. In fact, the anti-racist movement which I am part of is guilty of giving too much space to religious bigots because we thought they have the right to develop some kind of standing in our communities. But they are bigots. You've seen the development of Modi in India, who has abrogated any notion of constitutional rights for minorities. This is an outrageous growth of far right Hindu extremism. We talk about Muslim, we talk about Christian and even Buddhist extremism. We have to look at the issue of religion, but from a progressive point of view. The left has been too rigid in its concept of religion. That is a new development in the anti-racist movement.

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*Matthew Carr*

**'We're witnessing the possibility of a social implosion and a social regression along the lines of which we could not have imagined for many years.'**

I want to make a few comments coming out of what Jagdish and Suresh have said and then explain what One Day Without Us is about. First of all, what I really liked about what Jagdish and Suresh had to say was that it reminds people that there is history behind the Brexit vote. This is too easily forgotten. There is a tendency to imagine that 'public concerns' about immigration are new, that they somehow just appeared out of nowhere and that these concerns are a response to 'numbers', that this is a 'numbers issue'.

For the last ten years or so we've constantly heard things like 'the country is full', 'we don't mind immigrants, it's just that there are too many of them'. It's presented as if this is a neutral, race free, debate and discussion. There has been a constant denial that the Brexit vote had a racist component. A constant denial from almost everyone involved in the debate, not only the far-right or the Tory hard-right, but also from the left. Because certain sections of the left are desperate to see the Brexit vote as a progressive vote against global elites, a rejection of neoliberalism. They will not admit that it has a racist dimension to it. They will not concede that, even if it didn't explicitly have one, that in certain quarters it empowered racism to a degree that we haven't seen in years and years.

This empowerment is to such a degree that I personally, and many of the

people that have become involved in our campaign, recognise that it is an absolutely major social danger. We're witnessing the possibility of a social implosion and a social regression along the lines of which we could not have imagined for many years. And so, knowing that these so-called concerns about immigration didn't just begin because there were supposedly 'too many' people here and 'not enough' for 'our people', but that there is actually a whole history in this country of racism, hyper-nationalism, ethno-nationalism all of which mingled together in the Brexit vote. They mingled on one level to inflict a grotesque act of national self-harm. Most importantly, it created an atmosphere where no one is safe anymore. No one can count themselves immune or free from the toxic forces that have been unleashed by that referendum.

You often hear people say things like 'not everyone who voted for Brexit is a racist'. Nobody really goes around saying that they are. It's a straw-man argument. However, the interesting thing about that argument is that the people who make it do not want to be identified as racist, because racism is seen as something to row back from. Leave.EU and Farage don't talk about race, they don't talk about race explicitly. It's all coded. There are coded words like 'asylum seeker', 'migrant', 'Muslim' and so on. On one level you could mark this as a sign of progress in this country, not that we've become a post-racist society: we haven't achieved that. But over the years, through the struggles that Jagdish and Suresh described, as well as others, we've created a threshold of shame in which racism is understood to be entirely connected to skin colour or Nazis, and anything that's not that is acceptable. This represents a total misunderstanding of what racism actually is. Racism has been justified on many different grounds over the centuries: religion, skin colour, skull size, blood, and now, more recently, culture.

Culture is what racists now constantly go on about. Culture is one of the ways that racism has reinvented itself as pseudo-respectable thought in British society and also in Europe. This breaks down in different ways in terms of Brexit. First of all it breaks down in the way in which Muslims are imagined in this country. You constantly hear that the problem with immigration isn't a problem with immigrants, it's 'just that some people who come here have cultures that can't fit in with our culture'. This is new language; it wasn't as prevalent in the 1970s as it is now. It's absolutely dominant now, this talk about 'our culture'/'their culture'. So by problematising Muslims, wherever they come from, you avoid talking about race, you avoid talking about skin colour, and you seem to be having a 'neutral argument' about religion. Except that when you break down

those arguments, what's actually happening is that millions of people are being imagined as a singularly hateful group of people. So you're back in the world of racism.

Culture is also imagined as an 'invasion' in other ways: 'too many foreign languages on our streets', 'why don't they learn our language?'. I'm not saying that these arguments didn't exist in the past, because I think they always have to some extent. In this country we have a curious combination of imperial nostalgia and imperial amnesia, in the sense that we don't want to recognise how the British Empire came into being. We don't recognise the use of force, nationalism and racism that actually made it into an empire, and we only remember what are imagined as the 'good bits'. Like Boris Johnson and company who talk about being a 'buccaneering, trading nation', whatever that means.

All these forces were fed into the Brexit vote in various different ways at a time of social crisis. Not social crisis on the level that Germany saw, say, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, but nevertheless a significant social crisis in which people have felt that things have been constantly taken away from them: their security, wages, their NHS – all the things that hold society together have just been pulled apart, bit by bit, until more and more people have been put into a state of generalised precarity, where they cannot imagine their future individually, let alone collectively. So this creates very ripe and fertile ground for the kinds of things we've seen.

This was all skilfully manipulated by the Leave.EU campaign and by the Tory hard-right, very effectively manipulated to bang these arguments home again and again without ever explicitly mentioning race, just talking about numbers, 'resources', 'small country', 'too many people'. And so they succeeded in basically mainstreaming real hatred. Suresh is right to question the term xenophobia: 'suspicion of strangers' does not explain why a Polish guy gets killed on the streets of Essex. Nevertheless, what we're seeing now is words like 'migrant' becoming a racially coded word. 'Asylum seeker' is racially coded. It allows people to feel certain things and express certain emotions without ever having to use the words that were once used back in the 1960s and 1970s when you had John Tyndall and the National Front running amok.

This has created a really dangerous atmosphere, not only in this country but globally. That is the context within which the One Day Without Us campaign was launched. It began in unusual circumstances and I suppose it is an unusual campaign. When I wrote the book *Fortress Europe* a few years back about EU immigration policy and the treatment of asylum seekers and refugees to Europe, I visited Italy. It was the second year that

they were having a One Day Without Us national strike and boycott. The first year in 2009 had been a brilliant success. It was a boycott-strike of migrants and their supporters in which migrants took time off work or struck. There were whole factories coming out on strike in support of migrants: something very difficult to imagine in the UK or anywhere else in Europe. They mobilised about 350,000 people. It was a Facebook campaign started by five women who put this thing together and it just snowballed. The year that I saw was a complete flop. There just weren't many people involved in it.

I raised the question on Facebook: what would people think of having a national strike/boycott to counter the dangerous overlap between street level violence that we saw throughout the summer and autumn of 2016 and the rhetoric emanating from the Tory Party conference, which basically seemed to concede every single thing people on the street were demanding. This behaviour angered a lot of people and, to my surprise, the invitation went viral. Loads of people said that this should happen. We created a Facebook group of 5,000 by the first week and the nucleus of an organisation was created to think 'ok, lets make this happen, lets see what we can do'. When we had discussion about what this campaign could do, we soon found out that we were operating in a different context to the One Day Without Us in Italy and the huge protests that took place in the United States in 2006. For one thing: strikes. It's been a long time since the UK had a 'strike culture', and strikers are now associated with the 1970s. It was difficult to raise the question of strikes in this context, especially with the unions, who backed off immediately. In fact, the unions wouldn't touch that idea. You can only strike in this country if it's an industrial dispute organised through ballots – otherwise, they are illegal.

When I say 'we', who are 'we' exactly? 'We' were basically a group of people who came together on Facebook to form the nucleus of an organisation. It wasn't for us to tell people anything. It wasn't for us to say 'go on strike', 'do this, do that'. We never thought this. We thought that if this is going to happen, it has to be migrant-led, it has to be what migrants want to do in the places that they are. Another crucial thing we wanted to bear in mind: we didn't want just one 'big event' in London. At that time, the atmosphere being what it was after Tory Party conference, there were so many pro-EU marches going on. We probably could have said 'let's have a big march in London'. We might have got one, we might not. We thought it would just fade away, we thought having a march like that might get the issue on the 6 o'clock news, but it was unlikely. That would have been the end of it.

What we wanted to do was counter the kind of vicious rhetoric emanating from politicians. Have a bold statement of solidarity and community of exactly the kind that Suresh was talking about. Have it visible, across the country, at the same time, in communities, between migrants – as we put it – and their supporters. Those are the very broad aims. We did succeed to some extent. We had a day of action on February 28<sup>th</sup> 2017. When we reached that point, the campaign had become a startlingly wide coalition that I certainly didn't imagine when I wrote that initial post. We had support from most of the big unions, Tate Gallery, migrants across the country got involved and set up their own groups, their own regional or city-wide groups, we had other people just coming up out of nowhere having events that we just didn't know about. Numbers are difficult to estimate, but we think it was possibly tens of thousands.

The great thing that it did was to be, as far as I know, the first ever national day of action in solidarity with migrants in which the word migrant was put at the forefront of the whole protest. There were elements of resistance, defiance, celebration.

There were a lot of ideas about celebrating the contribution that migrants make to the UK, and celebration can be seen as a form of defiance and resistance. Some people criticised that, saying 'ah, you're measuring migrant contributions, you don't have to contribute such-and-such an amount to the Exchequer to justify being here'. We pointed out, yes there are people who do that but that's not what we're doing. Other people said, 'I'm not a migrant, I came here using my EU Treaty rights and I don't want to be classified as a migrant'. These were conversations we had to have. Organisations like the Three Million, who were basically created to defend and fight for EU nationals' rights, supported us. They were reticent at first because they didn't like the idea of a strike very much. I think they also had issues about this whole 'qualifying' of EU citizens as migrants. We said that this is a red line for us, that there are no distinctions between worthy and unworthy migrants. We said that in the most basic sense, a migrant is somebody who moves to live in a different country. We weren't interested in distinguishing between asylum seeker there, not so worthy; refugee, more worthy ... EU national at the top. We were having none of that. So all of these awkward and occasionally abrasive conversations were taken up. They were arguments and debates that you would expect to have in a campaign like this.

This time round, the slogan is 'Proud to be a migrant, proud to stand with migrants'. We want to do not only the same thing as before – a broad statement of unity, empower migrants, provide a platform where different

groups can bring their priorities to the table. We also want to reclaim the word migrant. We've looked at ten to fifteen years of almost solid, weekly headlines from the tabloids attacking migrants. The word has now become debased, it means so many insidious things. We want to reclaim it: the pride, dignity and freedom of being able to move to a different country. We also consider it very important that migrant doesn't mean 'you're here now as a migrant', it means 'how you've come here' – it's about migrant heritage as well. We want to reach out as widely as possible, to create a really broad movement of solidarity. We think that's essential for exactly the reasons that Suresh has outlined. We're facing a major threat to all of us right now. It can't be downplayed or negated, even though some people would like to. It can't be normalised, it can't be avoided. And so as I've often said to people, what we do over the next year, two years, will decide the future of this country for the next generation.

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*Mireya Gonzalez Rodriguez*

**'I think that Brexit has given voice to all of those who thought negative things already. They now feel validated because they don't feel alone in thinking I should go home.'**

I am Spanish and I came to the UK eighteen years ago. I wasn't supposed to be here for eighteen years, I was supposed to be here for a year as an Erasmus student. I came to study at the University of Leicester. I'm still here and have made the UK my home.

I've always been a migrant. I left home to come to a different country, learn a different language. I've had to communicate in a different way and live in a different environment that's not familiar to me. Therefore, I'm a migrant. It's just the way it is. I don't perceive that word as something horrible. I know that some British people living in Spain don't consider themselves to be migrants, they call themselves 'expats'. They consider the word migrant to be insulting. I don't think there is anything wrong with it.

I noticed that whilst trying to organise One Day Without Us in Leicester, that the word is problematic with some communities and with people who have been here longer than a few years. Europeans often don't consider themselves to be migrants. We were born with rights to move around the European Union, wherever we wanted, so we are not migrants. The Indian communities in Leicester don't consider themselves as migrants, they are

the ancestors of migrants, so to put that word to them was conflicting in many ways.

Leicester is one of the only cities in the UK where the vast majority of us are non-white and not British. It was an exciting place to organise One Day Without Us, because if it's not going to succeed in Leicester where will it succeed? Straight away we created social media platforms and from there it grew. We started having meetings in a local café and every week a different bunch of people came and we started noticing that, like always, we were preaching to the converted. The people that were there were mainly university workers, there were some charity workers, and the usual 'professional protesters'.

There is a lot of talk about large threats and aggression, but I want to talk about 'micro-aggressions', like walking along the street and being told 'we voted for you to go home'. Or being told, 'it's not about you, it's the others ... the Pakistanis, the Polish, Romanians ... they're all the same'. It's little comments like this that never get reported, because who is going to report every time someone tells them to 'go home'? Or when I'm speaking Spanish to my brother in a café and someone tells us to speak English because we're in 'their country'. These things happen, and they happen a lot and are never reported. Things like this are why I joined One Day Without Us.

I wanted to celebrate. I was tired of hearing about the 'economic impact of migrants'. I'm an archaeologist, we talk about migration here and now but it's been going on for a long time. It's been encouraged, the British have encouraged it and now they say you have to take a 'Life in the UK' test. They talk about how tolerant this country is and how it's embraced migration. Where is that society now?

I think that Brexit has given voice to all of those who thought negative things already. They now feel validated because they don't feel alone in thinking I should go home because I'm 'taking their job'.

In Leicester we thought 'we want to go big'. I approached the university, my MP and all other MPs from Leicester. I thought that the MPs wouldn't be interested, but all sent messages to be read out on the day of action. I also wrote to every single councillor and the Mayor of Leicester. I got one response and was told that the event clashed with a Labour Group meeting. On the day, the Labour Group did stop their meeting and joined us. The Mayor opened the event, speaking about migrants' contributions to Leicester.

When I approached the university and said 'I want a strike', there was instant shock-horror. Fortunately, I talked to the Equal Opportunities and

Diversity Provost. They supported us and, rather than call it a strike, we called it a walk-out. Students and lecturers walked out together into Leicester. It wasn't completely disruptive, we did something that allowed as many people as possible to make a stand. Not everyone is up for protest. I come from a country where people are out on the streets, protesting all the time – almost every weekend in some places – but some countries don't have that background. In the UK, I feel that there's not really that background of protest either, not on the same scale.

I wanted to be as inclusive as possible. I contacted the Council of Faiths, they were very supportive.

There was a walk-out and then a celebration in the Town Hall Square. We wanted the celebration to be lively. We had a series of speakers from very different backgrounds to talk about migration: from a Professor of Genetics, to a Filipino priest, to a comedian from Zambia. We had a Gospel choir, a socialist choir, a Samba band. I think it was quite successful in terms of media coverage, an article in the *Guardian*, [coverage on] BBC Radio Leicester.

One of the things we wanted to do in Leicester is say it's not just about Europe and Brexit. It's not just about me and other European citizens. We're about to lose rights that we had, but many migrants have never had these rights. I got involved because European Union rights are going to be taken away, but at the same time the question of migrants' rights is bigger than this.

We had some problems engaging some of the big migrant communities. Part of the problem is that the people organising the Leicester group are colleagues and friends from the University. It's a different question when this group tries to speak to working class Romanians, Polish, Italians or Spanish. You come from the university and tell them what they should be feeling or should be doing. It's not easy. It would be good to have further discussions about how this can be done.