

The new, younger face of anti-racism

AT THE FOREFRONT OF THE FIGHT AGAINST RACISM, ANTI-RACIST ACTION IS ATTRACTING YOUTHFUL IDEALISTS WITH DIRECT ACTION STANCE

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Their members and supporters are young, their look is alternative, and their attitude is tough. They are the Anti-Racist Action (ARA) — a fast growing, direct-action group which captured the city's attention last January when they took on white supremacists the Heritage Front as well as horseback riding Metro cops.

Many ARA members are the poster children for the 'grunge look', others could easily be mistaken for skinheads, except for the "racism is war" slogans on their studded leather jackets. Nose rings and tattoos are plentiful, and Doc Martins are seemingly essential.

Most members are new to the field of activism but some have experience working for groups and causes.

"It's a really good mix of experience and enthusiasm," says Kevin (pseudonym), an ARA spokesperson. "We have a lot of energy, and people like us seem to be growing faster than the Nazis."

Kevin explains the appeal for young people. "For high school students, racism is not abstract, it's very real. There was a real need to them involved," he says.

But students aren't just members, they are

on this issue. Why guarantee the freedom of speech of a group who would wipe out everyone else's freedom of speech? I don't think that you can separate what a teacher does outside and inside the classroom. He carries his position with him whether he teaches it or not," says Kuttner.

The more than 200 strong crowd was mostly made up of young students. Their ages ranged from 14 to about 22, and most had heard about the rally from friends who were members of the ARA, or from the flyers distributed around their schools.

Despite the amount of publicity they have gotten in the last few months, ARA is a relatively new group.

It began in September. After hearing that the Heritage Front was staging a march on the courthouse to defend their hotline (now under a Canadian Human Rights Commission injunction to stop taping hate messages), the initial organizers of ARA quickly got on the phone to organize a counter protest. With only 48 hours notice, they gathered 100 people. Realizing that there seemed to be need for this kind of confrontational action, ARA was formed.

In a very short amount of time, their meetings began attracting 60 or 70 people regularly. At the meetings, all decisions are put to a general



Photos from Friday's ARA protest on University Avenue.

Photos by Rodger Levesque

THEIR SLOGAN IS "ON THE PROWL", AND THEIR PAMPHLET FEATURES A TIGER ATTACKING A SWASTIKA

encouraged to take the initiative. ARA actively recruits students who want to start chapters in their own schools. High schools are targeted for posters and news of rallies. And it seems to be working. Last Friday's ARA rally in front of the Ministry of Education demanding the decertification of Mississauga teacher Paul Fromm, was organized by students. (see news story pg. 9)

Although he says he keeps his views out of the classroom, Fromm contributes to a white supremacist newsletter and has been meetings of white supremacist group the Western Guard.

Also present at the rally were several other groups showing their support for the cause, including the Lesbian Youth Peer Support (LYPS), and the Trotskyist League of Canada. Several teachers were also in the crowd, and one, Michael Kuttner, spoke at the rally.

Kuttner teaches at Toronto's Contact School, an alternative high school. He supports the students' work in the ARA, especially their campaign against Paul Fromm.

"I am enraged at the thought that some of his opinions might rub off on students. I don't believe that we can take a civil liberties stance

vote, and there is no central leader. Subcommittees are organized to tackle specific issues, and there is a group elected to make emergency decisions.

Since the Heritage Front was targeting Metro's high schools in its leafletting, poster and recruiting drives, the ARA focused their attention on schools as well.

Not every one at the rally agreed with the ARA's position on Fromm. Many of the students attending were uncertain of the details about Paul Fromm. Several also thought that firing him was not the only option.

"I don't think that students should be taught racism in the school, but if he's not actually spewing hate in the classroom, is it really fair to fire him?" asked one 14 year old student.

Another agreed, but thought that an opposing point of view should be given.

"I know that he's been linked to neo-Nazi groups, but unless he's teaching racism in the classroom, I'm not sure to what extent a teacher's private life should affect his career. Maybe the board should just make sure that his students are hearing the other side," said the 15 year old.

Whether or not they believed in the specific

goal of the rally, most of the participants said the rally itself would be beneficial.

"Even if I don't believe that Fromm should lose his job, I do believe in what they (the ARA) are doing. I'm here to show my support for their organization," said another student.

Several students, however, said that they were not members of the ARA because their school's administration would not allow them to form a chapter. One group of students from Northern and Jarvis High School said that their principal would not allow the ARA to organize at their school because the administration did not approve of its tactics.

Evidence of those tactics was visible at the rally. The protestors carried signs with slogans such as "Hunt the Nazi Front", "Crawl back to where you came Fromm" and "Run Nazi Chicken Shits". During the march, they shouted things like "Paul Fromm Nazi scum, students say your time has come" and "Paul Fromm is a Nazi leech, why should we pay him to teach".

Many of the younger students were not prepared for the ARA's warnings about arrests (cards with a lawyer's number were passed out). The crowd was admonished to stay in

groups of at least four, and to link together, 'just in case'.

"Are we going to be arrested?" asked one young student. "I wouldn't have come if I knew we would go to jail".

The ARA's tactics while not violent, are based on confrontation.

In November, when the Heritage Front hosted a meeting which included several prominent neo-Nazi figures, the ARA discovered their meeting place and pelted the hall with eggs. Their slogan is "On the Prowl", and their pamphlet features a tiger attacking a swastika.

"They (the Heritage Front) are publicly violent, and we have to confront them," says Kevin defending the group's tactics.

The large police presence at Friday's rally was a reminder for ARA members of the now famous Jan. 25 incident in front of the Ontario Supreme Court House, during which police rushed the activists after they refused to let the Heritage Front past them to the main doors. The police led the Front through the protestors, and there were several injuries.

Not everyone in the anti-racism camp, however, agrees with the ARA's tactics, including Robert Funk, Communications Director for the League for Human Rights, (B'nai Brith).

"There is a place for demonstration, but it certainly shouldn't incite anyone to violence. We know that it's frustrating to work through legal routes when the other side is breaking the rules, but sometimes results take time. We prefer to try and change things through legal channels," says Funk.

Funk emphasizes B'nai Brith is not against the ARA.

"We do commend their commitment. I don't believe that they could undermine our work. We can't worry about how actions are interpreted by people like the Heritage Front."

The ARA agrees that there is no real tension between the two groups.

"We like to work in conjunction with other groups, but we try to make sure that there is no overlap" said Kevin.

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