

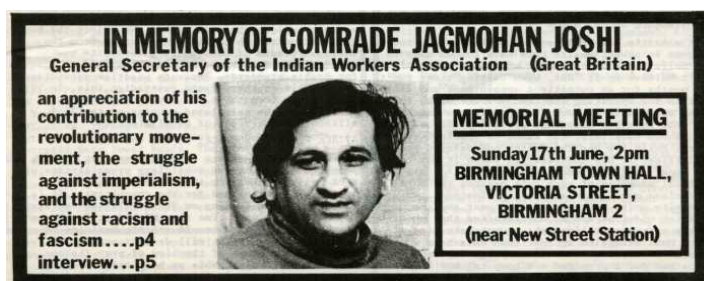
**The Brown in  
Black Power:  
Militant South Asian  
Organizing in  
Post-War Britain**

Arsalan Samdani



death when his comrades and supporters gathered at Birmingham town hall to pay tribute to him, Shirley Joshi recalled his take on the role of IWA (GB) in the following words:

*“Never let it be said that the first generation of black immigrants played the role of uncle Toms. Far from it. They took to the streets and struck blows against all oppression...We won't sit back, we will hit back.”*



*Over 1,500 supporters packed Birmingham hall to remember Jagmohan Joshi two weeks after his death at a rally against state racism. A member of the Communist Workers' Movement had the following to say about his commitment to radical politics: “Defying illness, displaying great personal courage, Comrade Joshi lived and died a Communist fighter, a soldier in the great army of world revolution and provided an example for us all to seek to follow.”*

Despite IWA's decline, the solidarity work that Jagmohan Joshi and his comrades pushed for in post-war Britain laid the foundation for the militant Asian youth movements of the '70s and '80s.

With the rise of the far right, centrist liberal politics are being challenged by mass constituents identifying with right-wing forces that promise a break from the status quo. The primary target of this resurgence in the West has been black and brown people. Whether it's under the pretext of fighting terrorism, controlling immigration or fighting crime, the dehumanization of people of colour remains a foundational principle to maintain the hegemony of Western capitalist states today. Despite successfully dividing people of colour and assimilating many of them into the economy, a large majority continue to live in poverty and precarity. The IWA (GB) of post-war Britain inspires us to think about the possibilities for black and brown communities to work together, without effacing their differences, to radically confront the liberal and far-right forces of today.

# The Brown in Black Power: Militant South Asian Organizing in Post-War Britain

Arsalan Samdani

Published by *Jamboor* August 27, 2019

Cover photo, taken March 21, 1971, of youth with the Indian Workers' Association marching in London against the 1971 Immigration Act.



*Jan 1969: Black People's Alliance led a march of about 2,000 to Downing street, where Jagmohan Joshi (General Secretary of the Indian Worker's Association - IWA (GB)) delivered a memorandum to Harold Wilson demanding the repeal of the Commonwealth Immigration Act and an end to state racism.*

Recalling his visit to London in July 1967, Stokely Carmichael, then chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), wrote about how surprised he was to “hear Black Power resonating and to see the raised fists in the Asian communities, especially among Pakistani youth.” He had expected the slogan to speak to African and Caribbean communities in the country, as it did, but not to South Asians.

In fact, South Asian, African, and Caribbean immigrants came together to form some of the most radical coalitions to fight racism in post-war Britain. One of those organizations was the Indian Workers' Association (IWA), which became a leading voice in the Black Power movement, bringing out thousands in protests, as well as organizing immigrants in their workspaces. That is why when Malcolm X visited Britain in the mid-'60s, he wanted to meet IWA leaders. Recalling this history can inspire us to think creatively about how to forge solidarities to confront white supremacy and fascism today.

The SYM mobilized against the National Front and other ultra-right parties and the complicity of the police. They formed self-defence patrols to protect their communities. While their organizing was militant in nature, their demands were mostly for the protection of their communities and for an end to racist violence. They wanted the police to be held accountable for its complicity and wanted people of colour to be treated as equal citizens. The sentiment of that generation can be felt in Grover's words:

*“We are likely to die in this country. We don't have a place we can call home like our elders, which is going back to India, Pakistan, Bangladesh or Sri Lanka. We want to live as equal citizens. So if it means staying and fighting that's what we have to do and we're not going to give an inch to that.”*



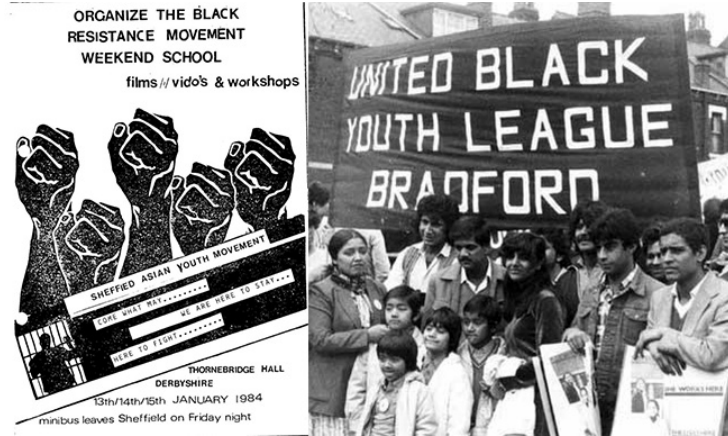
*SYM activists challenging Enoch Powell and demanding justice for Gurdip Singh Chaggar.*

The influence of the IWAs as the leading South Asian organizations gradually eroded through the late '70s. The new youth organizations did not associate with the assimilationist philosophy of IWA (Southall) and neither did they strongly identify with IWA (GB)'s emphasis on the overthrow of capitalism as a primary objective. Joshi's untimely death in 1979 further limited the IWA (GB)'s ability to provide leadership to Britain's black youth movements. He died from a cardiac arrest at the age of 43, while leading a demonstration of 4,000 in London to protest against state racism and police brutality. Two weeks after his

Inspired by SYM's creation, other South Asian youth organizations formed and became known as the Asian Youth Movements (AYMs). These included groups such as the Bangladeshi Youth Association, which campaigned against racist attacks in East End London, and the Bradford Youth Movement which campaigned against deportations and racist attacks. While the IWAs intervened in labor relations and immigration policies, the AYM's focused on directly countering racist attacks and police violence on the streets.

Suresh Grover, one of the founding members of SYM, recalled the guiding principle for his involvement:

*"We were British Asians with black politics...and we wanted to unite people to combat the issue of racism."*



*Left: A poster for Sheffield Asian Youth Movement's Black Resistance Movement Weekend School.*

*Right: United Black Youth League was formed by former members of Asian Youth Movement Bradford who disagreed with the latter's decision to accept state funding. Saeed Hussain, a member of the Workers Revolutionary Party in 1981, recalled the debates of the time: "The UBYL was very clear that we were a Black organisation...we were a part of Black communities and we would work together with all other organisations as equal partners on issues such as anti-fascism, immigration, as well as anti-imperialist issues, building links nationally and locally."*

Post-war Britain saw an influx of workers from its former colonies in the Caribbean, Africa, and South Asia. Upon arrival, they found themselves in precarious and dangerous working conditions, earning menial wages and living in substandard housing.

While the economic logic of capitalism pulled people into the UK (post-war Britain had a labor shortage), white citizens could not stand having to share living spaces, neighbourhoods, schools and other services with "coloured immigrants." Fanned by right-wing groups, simmering racial tensions eventually burst into outright race riots, first in Liverpool on August 30, 1948, then spreading to Birmingham and Nottingham and culminating in the infamous Notting Hill riots of August 1958.

Inspired by its rise in the US, immigrants in Britain adopted the slogan "Black Power" to unite people of colour against this racism. Black Power in the US and other parts of the world was defined as the assertion of black identity for people of African descent, historically oppressed through slavery, colonization, and anti-black racism, in order to fight colonialism and racial discrimination. Black Power groups spread the cultural message of pride and resistance for black people. A black consciousness in Britain, however, was imagined more broadly, defining "blackness" as a political identity for people who shared a history of oppression under Western imperialism and who were now being treated as second class citizens in Britain. But this formulation was not about effacing the substantial differences between immigrant communities; rather it assumed that the only way to confront their common oppression by white Britain was by coming together. "Black," for them, was a political identity, one to unite African and Caribbean immigrants with South Asians in order to wage a united front of resistance.

South Asians who arrived in the UK carried with them the consciousness and legacy of anti-colonial struggles in the Indian subcontinent. Many brought their anti-imperialist politics with them and saw the struggle against racism in the metropole as a continuation of their struggles in the colonies. They were confronting one and the same colonial project.





*1976: Residents of Southall riot to protest the murder of Gurdip Singh Chaggar. Despite the presence of the influential IWA (Southall), the youth went on to form alternative organizations that believed in militant direct action.*

This exemplified the growing cultural and political differences between the first and second generations of South Asians. These young British-born South Asians did not come from Communist Party backgrounds. They had faced racism throughout their lives on the streets of Britain, and they were not politically tied to South Asia. They were more militant, attracted to self-defence and direct action, and their association with Black Power organizing did not depend on one leader. Unlike their parents' generation, they had no ambiguity about where they belonged and they had the self-confidence to demand equal citizenship. They were not hesitant to confront racists or the police directly. In 1979, Blair Peach, a teacher and activist from New Zealand, was killed by a police officer in an Anti-Nazi League protest in Southall. This further intensified the fight against the police and the National Front on the streets of Southall.

## **Fractures: radical and liberal politics in the IWA**

In 1958, Shirley Joshi's husband, Jagmohan Joshi, was elected as General Secretary of the IWA's Midland branch. A Punjabi Sikh who moved to Britain to train as an accountant, Joshi was also a communist who pushed the South Asian community to embrace militant people's power and self-defence, and reject calls for assimilation. His Midland branch of the IWA aimed to not just help Indians settle in Britain, but to organize them along militant lines. Joshi was instrumental in pushing the South Asian community to join radical African and Caribbean activists in a common struggle against racism—all under the banner of "Black Power."

But this approach produced tensions between the various IWA branches across the country, which became divided on the organization's role and direction. The tension boiled down to two positions: one group saw the IWA's main task to be running welfare programs and operating as an ethnic social group, while another group emphasized its political role. When the organization attempted to settle these disputes and centralize its various units in 1958, it was not able to do so. Two distinct IWAs emerged as a result: IWA (GB [Great Britain]), led by Jagmohan Joshi and Avatar Johal out of the Midlands, and IWA (Southall) led by Vishnu Sharma.

Both IWAs had very different organizing approaches. IWA (Southall) saw their task as one to unite all Indians, regardless of their political affiliations or class background. They insisted on remaining non-sectarian, and focused on the provision of welfare and social services only. In essence, IWA (Southall) had an assimilationist philosophy: they wanted to educate Indians to make them acceptable to the British. The group was also sympathetic to India's Congress Party, and many of the party's overseas members were part of IWA (Southall). When Indira Gandhi visited London in 1978, it was IWA (Southall) that hosted her for a public event—even though she had become extremely unpopular amongst Indian Punjabis post-Emergency. The visit was deplored by a large number of Indians, many of whom protested inside and outside the venue where she spoke. The IWA led by the militant Joshi—IWA (GB)—was on the frontlines with these protestors, decrying Indira Gandhi as a traitor and a murderer.

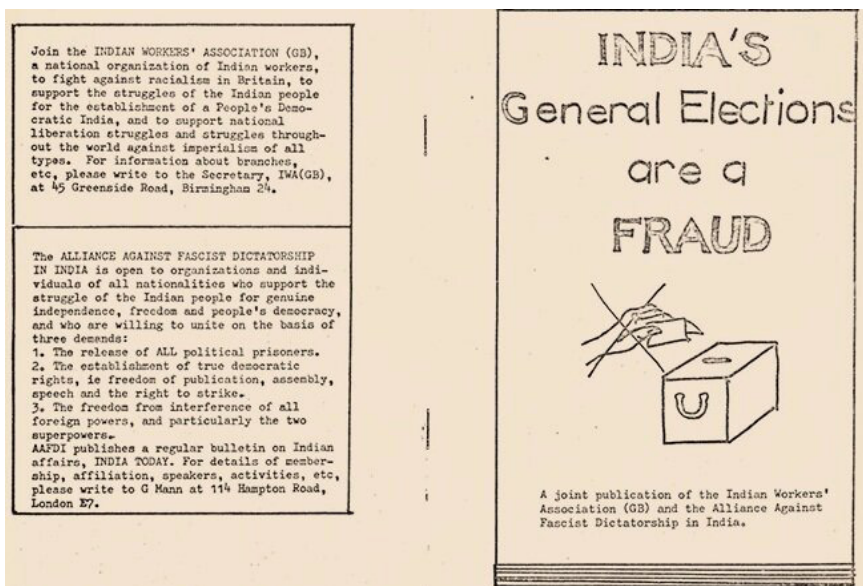


Nov 1978: Indira Gandhi on her way to speak at the Dominion cinema in London at the invitation of IWA (Southall). The event was marked by a protest of over 200 people who condemned her actions during the 1975-77 Emergency.

the fourth most popular party in parliament. Their popularity emboldened racists in areas like Southall, where, on June 1976, an eighteen-year-old engineering student, Gurdip Singh Chaggar, was stabbed to death.



Anti-immigration protesters march in 1972. Enoch Powell received thousands of letters of support after his "Rivers of Blood" speech where he infamously said that "in this country in 15 or 20 years' time the black man will have the whip hand over the white man." He became a leading figure head for many racist organizations across Britain.



IWA (GB) and The Alliance Against Fascist Dictatorship in India published this pamphlet to reject the 1977 elections and Indira Gandhi's "dictatorial" rule. IWA (GB) placed the fight against Gandhi's rule alongside the struggle against racism in Britain, and saw both as part of the global anti-imperialist struggle.

IWA (Southall) organized a meeting on facism, but the youth attending the meeting grew frustrated with the "timid" bureaucratic, lobbyist approach of their elders and the lack of a concrete response to Chaggar's murder. Opting instead for direct action, they left the meeting to protest against Southall's police for its inaction, and in the process ended up throwing stones at a Jaguar who's driver called them "black bastards". Shortly after, they launched the Southall Youth Movement (SYM). In the days that followed, they organized a number of protests, attacked white motorists who chanted racist slurs at them and when their comrades were arrested, surrounded the police station demanding their release.



Not all Black Power organizations agreed with IWA (GB)'s approach to the white working class. Organizations such as the Black Liberation Front (BLF) and the Racial Adjustment Action Society (RAAS) saw racism as the primary form of oppression and was therefore opposed to uniting with white workers, which to them was one of the most overtly racist sections of white society. A BLF Pamphlet from 1971 stated:

*"Nobody can tell a Black worker that he must unite with white worker when all the time the white worker tells him to get back to where he came from" - BLF pamphlet from 1971*

There were however other organizations such as the Black Unity and Freedom Party (BUFP), whose politics were more aligned to that of IWA (GB). They believed that class oppression was the primary mode of oppression faced by all workers, however they argued that Black workers needed to take the role of revolutionary vanguard. This position was stated in a party document from May 1969 in the following words:

*"The white working class has temporarily abandoned its historic mission... In effect, the white working class has joined forces with the ruling class, in an unholy alliance against the interest of Black people."*

Through the '60s, IWA (GB) under Jagmohan Joshi's leadership played an important role in uniting black and brown workers to wage a united struggle to fight racism while staying committed to the project of overthrowing capitalism. This however was a line that Joshi had to push constantly within the IWA's membership. While he was successful in bringing Indians out in solidarity with African and Caribbean immigrants, this union also depended significantly on Joshi's leadership.

## **Growing fascism and the Asian youth movements of the second generation**

After Enoch Powell's 1968 Rivers of Blood speech, despite lip service condemnation by mainstream parties, it was clear that Powell had struck a chord with Britain's white majority. The following years led to an increase in street violence against immigrants. By the mid-'70s, the ultra-right National Front had gained enough seats to become

In addition to India's Congress party, IWA (Southall) also maintained close ties to Britain's Labour Party, and would often mobilize the Punjabi community to canvas for Southall's local Labour MP. When the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act was passed—an act that severely restricted immigration from Britain's former colonies—the Labour Party first promised to fight for its repeal. However, as elections came close, Southall's Labour MP George Pargiter, under pressure from the white-dominated Southall Residents Association, abstained from a vote to review the Act in 1963. By early 1964, Pargiter began to call for a complete ban on immigration in Southall. IWA (Southall) initially voiced their opposition to this decision by fielding their own candidate in the election. However, eventually they not only retracted that decision, but also announced their full support for Labour, canvassing for Pargiter and distributing Labour leaflets in Punjabi and Urdu.

Despite support from IWA (Southall) and its members, after winning the election Pargiter went on to threaten the Sikh community in the following words:

*"Sikh parents should encourage their children to give up their turbans, their religion and their dietary laws. If they refuse to integrate, then we must be tough. They should be told that they would be the first to go if there was unemployment."*

IWA (GB), on the other hand, was firmly opposed to working with the Labour Party. That is why, in 1964, it refused to be a part of the high profile Campaign Against Racial Discrimination (CARD). Led by a strong group of radical intellectuals, CARD's purpose was to influence British government policies on race and immigration. However, it also collaborated with the Labour Party, a decision IWA (GB) did not endorse.

But IWA (GB) reserved its strongest words of condemnation for IWA (Southall). In their 1967 circular, Joshi wrote the following:

*"...the outstanding common feature of all these groups, despite their internal contradictions, is that they are all anti-communist, opportunist, reactionary stooges of the Indian High Commission, toadies of the Labour Party and hence enemies of the working class and the Indian community."*

IWA (GB)'s main strength came from its ability to mobilize South Asian industrial workers in strike actions. Through the '60s and '70s, they were able to provide critical leadership in a number of large strikes, such as the Imperial Typewriters factory strike in Leicester in 1974 where 500 South Asian workers went on strike. Two years later, the Grunwick strike led by Jayaben Desai and other South Asian women workers also received critical support from IWA (GB).



Led by Jayaben Desai (right), the Grunwick strike was a watershed moment in British industrial history, for it was the first time an immigrant worker struggle won widespread support from the labour movement. The strike started in 1976, lasted two years and was supported by the wider labour movement and Black Power organizations.

IWA (GB) did not strive for unity among Indians from all classes. They supported strikes by workers, even when the employer was Indian, and in some cases even when they were IWA members. Most of these strikes occurred in garment factories, such as Raindi Textiles and Loeftic Shirt Company. The workers at these factories were mainly South Asian women, whose demands for greater pay and unionization had them fired by their Indian male employers. However, while IWA (GB) was able to organize women for a number of actions, it did not successfully recruit or build female leaders. IWA (GB)'s leadership always remained male.

create a united front of all working-class people. Therefore IWA (GB) continued to stress the need for white workers to join these struggles in a united front. The IWA (GB) did not, however, want to achieve this unity at the expense of ignoring race. Instead, they saw class and racial oppression as inextricably intertwined, opposition to one required opposition to the other.

Joshi explained the role of black workers in the following words:

*“black workers, through their struggle against imperialism in their own countries and their double exploitation in this country have become more aware. Black workers were therefore the group destined to lead the struggle and that once they were involved in struggle white workers would join them.”*

In a separate pamphlet, IWA (GB) reached this conclusion in 1968:

*“In the earlier years of this decade the main task of our Organisation has been to organise the Indian workers into trade unions and to fight against the discriminatory policies of the employers...In the last few years...Indian workers have found it increasingly necessary to also combat the racist attitudes and behaviour of the trade unions.”*



1967: Front page of the first issue of IWA (GB)'s weekly bilingual magazine, *Lalkar* (war-cry against aggression). The title to the feature story translates to: *“Vietnam resisting American Imperialism.”*

Birmingham in February 1965. Jagmohan Joshi and Avatar Johal accompanied him to Smethwick, where the Tory MP Peter Griffiths had recently won a racially charged election on a promise to drive black people out of Smethwick by using state funds to purchase houses that would then be sold to whites only. Malcolm X had the following to say to reporters about his visit:

*“I have come, because I am disturbed by reports that coloured people in Smethwick are being treated badly. I have heard they are being treated as the Jews were under Hitler.”*

When asked what he thought needed to be done, he responded: “I would not wait for the fascist elements in Smethwick to erect gas ovens.”



*Feb 1965: Malcolm X visited Marshall Street in Smethwick on the invitation of IWA (GB). Peter Griffiths (Tory MP) won an election in Smethwick on the promise that the government would purchase any house that went on sale to keep them from being purchased by people of colour.*

Even though Jagmohan Joshi was recognized as a leading organizer in the anti-racism struggles of the ‘60s and ‘70s, he was against the creation of exclusive black unions. He felt that the ultimate aim was to

The strong opposition to the assimilation politics of IWA (Southall) kept members of IWA (GB) together for a while, but this unity did not last. In 1967, IWA (GB) also split over competing positions on the peasant uprising in Naxalbari (West Bengal, India) that took place that year. Supported by the Chinese Communist Party, the uprising led to a split within the Communist Party of India – Marxist (CPI-M), between a radical faction who supported the peasant uprising and an increasingly parliamentary faction that not only opposed it but actively suppressed it. Supporters of the movement eventually left the CPI-M and created the more insurgent, Communist Party of India – Marxist-Leninist (CPI-ML). These divisions were mirrored in the IWA (GB) and led to a split: Jagmohan Joshi’s group aligned itself with pro-Naxal CPI-ML, while Prem Singh formed an IWA that sided with the CPI-M. The split itself is quite telling about the ideological and strategic differences within South Asian communists in the diaspora. While both Joshi and Singh self-identified as communists, Joshi supported an immediate insurrection in India, while Singh saw this as adventurous and suicidal for the left, preferring a parliamentary path instead.



*Feb 1978: IWA (GB) leaders Jagmohan Joshi (bottom left), Teja Singh (second from bottom right) and Avatar Johal (bottom right) meet members of the Communist Party of China at Mao’s birth place in Shaoshan, China. The image is indicative of the IWA (GB)’s Maoist tilt, which informed their stance on the Naxalbari insurgency as well as their anti-racism work in Britain.*

## IWA (GB) and Black Power

Though the IWA (GB) fractured, its radical faction, led by Joshi, was able to find allies elsewhere. At the time, there were several other radical Black Power organizations in Britain whose politics aligned with Joshi's commitment to people's power and insurgency. He went on to form alliances between the South Asian community and these Black Power organizations for a broad front of racialized workers in the UK.

In 1961, Joshi, along with the anti-fascist activist Maurice Ludmer, co-founded the Co-ordinating Committee Against Racial Discrimination (CCARD) to oppose the proposed Commonwealth Immigration Act. Under CCARD's umbrella were several organizations, including the West Indian Workers' Association, the Pakistani Workers' Association and the Birmingham University Socialist Union. In September 1961, CCARD led a contingent of African, Caribbean, South Asian and white allies through the streets of Birmingham to protest the proposed immigration bill. When politicians campaigned against immigrants, CCARD called them out for promoting racial tensions. They also led a number of other campaigns, including testing the ban on the 'colour bar' that had been implemented after the passing of the 1965 Race Relations Act. They would organize a group of immigrants to visit pubs, hotels, restaurants, hairdressers, and other service providers in the Midland area to see if they would be served. If they did not, they would report the entity to the Race Relations Board.

In April 1968, Joshi co-founded the Black Peoples' Alliance (BPA) at a house in Leamington Spa that had previously been attacked by the KKK. The founding conference was attended by 51 delegates from 21 militant African, Asian and Caribbean organizations including the Pakistani Workers' Association, the West Indian Standing Conference (WISC), the Afro-Asian Liberation Front, the Black Regional Action Movement (BRAM), and the Universal Coloured People's Association (UCPA). While uniting different immigrant groups under the political identity "black," the participants also agreed to disallow middle-class ethnic organizations or reformists from joining the alliance. Notes from the inaugural meeting express this agreement in the following words:

*"Obviously the support of all sections of the Black Communities should be sought...but not at the cost of taking the soft line preferred by many of the middle-class Immigrants."*



*Left: 21st March 1971: BPA brings out 8000 people to Hyde Park in London to demonstrate against the 1971 Commonwealth Immigration Act. Jagmohan Joshi (center) seen on stage. Right: UCPA's Black Power Newsletter states the objectives of BPA, followed by an image of their January 1969 rally at Hyde Park.*

Members of BPA saw the project of combating racism as one linked to combating capitalism. Thus for them, the term "black" was a radical political identity that included radical South Asians, but did not include members of the Black or South Asian community that compromised with the capitalist state. In January 1969, BPA led a contingent of 8,000 in the "march for dignity" to Downing Street where they demonstrated against the 1968 Immigration Bill and Enoch Powell's Rivers of Blood speech.

Joshi's ability to bring out thousands of IWA members to support Black Power marches made him known as a central figure of black political action in Britain. Shirley Joshi recalled that, for this reason, Malcolm X requested a meeting with the IWA (GB) when he visited