

Labour government prosecutes asylum seekers in Britain

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The Blair government is prosecuting nine asylum seekers who were among scores of detainees who angrily protested inhumane conditions at the Campsfield Detention Centre in July 1997. The immigrant refugees—Sunny Ozidede, Stanley Nwaidike, Edward Onabanjo Agora, Lucky Agbebaaku, Sambou Marong, John Quaquah, Enahoro Esemuze and Harrison Tubman—are being tried on charges of violent conduct and riot at Oxford Crown Court.

The forcible transfer of two detainees by the security guards sparked the outburst. The refugees occupied various parts of the building and destroyed some property. Around 50 detainees broke into the courtyard and through the perimeter fencing where they were apprehended by police. Heavily armed riot police using Land Rovers encircled the entire area.

After the protest was dissipated authorities transferred 98 detainees who were not involved in the disturbance to other prisons. Detention centre officials made the 50 protesters and others sleep on the floor in the visitors area while they reviewed footage from a surveillance video. Then the immigrants were locked into their rooms for eight days, only being let out to get food from the canteen. The use of toilets and showers was restricted. Detainees were also barred from seeing visitors for nearly a fortnight. During this period some of the detainees were deported without being able to contact their lawyers.

The charges against the nine asylum seekers carry a maximum sentence of 5 and 10 years imprisonment. The majority of the asylum seekers, five of whom escaped the military regime in Nigeria, have already been held under lock and key in Britain for nearly a year. Of the nine, two are minors and one is a teenager. Two have already attempted suicide whilst in youth detention centres and four have been on hunger strikes

in prison. Two of those charged were subsequently granted asylum, but now face a long custodial sentence after which they could be deported.

The current trial is a mockery of justice. During the pre-trial hearings the judge refused to authorise the transfer of Legal Aid payments so that defendants could choose their own lawyers. The judge has limited the ability of the defence to call key witnesses. Two key witnesses have been deported. Others have been intimidated, fearing that their applications for asylum would be rejected if they testify as defence witnesses.

The news media have portrayed the protest as an act of wanton vandalism. No attempt has been made to present the grievances of the refugees or the violation of human rights by the British authorities.

Very little is known about what goes on inside detention centres such as Campsfield. According to the Home Office they are “secure hostels and not prisons.” But the facts reveal something quite different.

Some of those responsible for reviewing prison conditions have criticised the arbitrary use of detention in general and conditions within Campsfield in particular. Detainees are held without charge for an unlimited amount of time. The state is not required to justify its reasons for detaining an asylum seeker and at the same time has the power to limit a refugee’s legal representation.

Campsfield, formally a youth detention centre, was opened in 1993 to accommodate up to 200 refugees. The perimeter fencing is 20 feet high and topped with razor wire. There are 40 closed-circuit televisions throughout the building. Those wishing to visit are searched and must then pass through five separate remote-controlled doors. Detainees are housed two to a room.

A private security firm, Group 4, runs the detention

centre under the direction of the Home Secretary. Detainees have made numerous complaints about security guards using racist insults. When the *Independent* newspaper carried an article reporting this, Group 4 took its case to the Press Complaints Council. The case was turned down.

Sir David Ramsbottom, the Inspector of Prisons, has condemned conditions inside the detention centre. He singled out the policy of transferring detainees to criminal prisons after they lodge complaints about unfair treatment.

The growing demand for detention centres like Campsfield arises from the British government's policy of incarcerating greater numbers of asylum seekers. The Immigration Act of 1971 gives authorities the power to detain immigrants without charge or judicial review for an indefinite period. Refugees have fewer rights than many persons charged with criminal acts. For instance a refugee cannot remain at liberty by means of bail while awaiting the outcome of an immigration hearing.

Amnesty International conducted a survey of 150 asylum seekers detained on June 1, 1996. Their study showed that on average detainees were held for more than five months. The majority had been held from the time of their initial application. Out of the 2,000 detained annually, 300 were placed in criminal prisons.

This violation of civil liberties is compounded by the restrictions placed on the appeals process. Under the Immigration and Asylum Act of 1993 a refugee who has been denied asylum has only 10 days to appeal, making it almost impossible to assemble documents and legal representation. In the 12 months following the Act's implementation, only 700 people were granted full rights of asylum—less than 5 percent of those who applied.

These conditions have provoked angry protests by refugees before. In 1994 detainees at Campsfield House carried out a hunger strike and two protests. In June 1997 they held a rooftop protest. The latter followed the death of a detainee who was being transferred to prison.

The Blair government's decision to conduct a criminal case against the Campsfield refugees is clearly a political act. In opposition Labour supported the core of Tory policy against asylum seekers while posing as critics of its worst excesses. Now in power, the Labour

Party intends to use the prosecution of the Campsfield Nine to stoke up anti-immigrant chauvinism and further curtail the rights of refugees. According to the Refugee Council, the numbers of deportations from Britain more than trebled between 1994 and 1997, from 2,219 to 7,019. The biggest leap occurred in 1997, the year Labour took office, rising by 2,209 on the previous year.

In late October the Labour government denounced 300 Romany gypsies who had escaped racial attacks in Slovakia as "bogus" asylum seekers and shipped many back. The government followed this up by announcing plans to reduce the period of appeal to five days.



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