

British media incites hatred against Eastern European refugees

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Public opinion is being carefully conditioned by the mass media to accept the legitimacy of Labour's Immigration and Asylum Bill. Home Secretary Jack Straw declares that most asylum-seekers are 'economic migrants' without any valid claim. A vociferous press and TV campaign vilifying refugees as 'scroungers' and 'cheats' has reinforced this.

Those singled out for this treatment since last October are the Romany Gypsies, a group with a terrible history of persecution. First defined as 'non-Aryan' then 'asocial', thousands were exterminated by Adolf Hitler's regime in the thirties. In Eastern European countries such as Romania and the Czech and Slovak republics they have become stateless, being denied all basic citizenship rights.

Since 1989 pogroms claimed the lives of some 300 Romany Gypsies in Romania. In Slovakia last year Jan Slota, chairman of the then governing Slovak National Party, stated on national radio: 'I love roasted meat Gypsy-style but I'd prefer more meat and fewer Gypsies.'

Earlier in the year, the anti-racist journal *Searchlight* reported the plans of a town council in the Czech Republic to create a Gypsy ghetto surrounded by a 5-meter perimeter wall. This barrier at Usti nad Labem was to be patrolled by private security guards. In Pilsen, Gypsies have been housed in 10 portable cabins, surrounded by a fence with a police station in the compound.

In both countries racist assaults, including murder, have been treated leniently or have gone unpunished.

A documentary broadcast by the Czech government last year, claiming that Romany Gypsies would receive generous social security payments if they moved to Britain, was seized on by the media to denounce asylum-seekers as freeloaders. This cynical ploy by the Czech government was reported in isolation from its drive to expel Gypsies from the country through a combination of discrimination and harassment.

In the wake of the first arrivals last October, the Murdoch-owned *Sun* dubbed it 'The Giro Czech Invasion', and has kept up a constant witch-hunt against refugees from Eastern Europe. Hundreds of those who arrived were immediately

deported.

The *Daily Mail* published a two-page feature last month entitled: 'The Good Life on Asylum Alley', claiming that those granted asylum were enjoying a luxurious lifestyle in hotel accommodation in south-east coastal towns such as Dover.

While the media peddled the line that these asylum-seekers were bogus, the British government undertook diplomatic visits to the Czech Republic demanding that its government take measures to tackle the worst forms of state-sanctioned racism. President Vaclav Havel nominally agreed to address such issues as the 70 percent unemployment rate amongst the Romany Gypsies and blatant discrimination that bars them from access to public facilities. The British government also obtained financial compensation from the Czech government for the cost of repatriating the refugees. This was in exchange for Britain lifting the threat of imposing visa restrictions on Czech citizens. The Prague government was concerned that this would jeopardise their bid to seek early admission into the European Union.

The attempt to turn refugees into scapegoats for the developing social crisis in Britain reached fever pitch following the discovery of 103 Romanian Gypsies at Dartford International Ferry Terminal earlier this month. They were discovered in the back of a truck, which had travelled over from the Belgian port of Zeebrugge.

The 40 men in the group were immediately placed in detention centres, whilst the women and children were housed in an unfurnished 1903 smallpox unit that is part of Joyce Green hospital in Dartford.

The *Sun* immediately blamed the refugees for the underfunding of the National Health Service and the shortage of hospital beds. Due to this hysterical campaign, a poll of local residents actually believed that patients had been evicted to make way for the Romanians. The ward where the women and children were housed had been closed two years ago because it lacked lift access.

The *Sun* continued to print unfounded accusations of thousands of pounds being lavished on refugees to provide

English lessons and medical supervision. Kent Social Services, who have a legal obligation to feed and house the destitute in the county, have refuted these claims.

In the *Sun*'s December 10 issue an article claimed that English lessons were being offered to stop the refugees from being bored. Under the derisory caption 'Speaka The Lingo' it stated: 'Here's some phrases translated from Romanian to English the immigrants might find useful: Va rog, domnule, da-ti-mi si mie un banut? *Spare some loose change, Sir?* Unde este cel mai apropiat oficiu de ajutor social? *Where is the nearest benefit office?*'

Due to this constant hounding, the women and children were forced to move to different accommodation three times in the space of 10 days.

Anger over acute social problems--such homelessness, lack of adequate welfare provisions and local amenities--is being deflected in the direction of refugees. Moreover, in towns on the south coast where a majority of Eastern European refugees have settled, local councils have not been provided with any extra funds from central government.

The 400 asylum seekers who live in the town of Dover have faced abuse and harassment from local residents. This has been fuelled by a campaign in the local newspaper, the *Dover Express*. In October it published an editorial attacking 'Scroungers incorporated', which said:

'We want to wash the dross down the drain.... Illegal immigrants, asylum seekers (when they get asylum are they happy?), bootleggers (who take many guises) and the scum of the earth drug smugglers have targeted our beloved coastline for some unwarranted attention....'

'While Labour luvvies drivel on at that most historic of northern pleasure outposts--Blackpool--we are left with the backdraft of a nation's human sewage and NO CASH to wash it down the drain.'

The *Folkestone Herald* published a front page article in November headlined: 'POTATOES: GET OFF OUR PATCH--For mash, read smash as Slovak's low prices 'steal our customers". The article by Sarah Hall alleged, 'TOWN CENTER call-girls in Folkestone claim immigrant women have sunk to an all-time low--selling their bodies for the price of a spud [potato]. The blouses are coming off as refugee 'potato patch dollies' are winning their own version of the war of the undieworlds.'

The author was forced to concede that the police had never received any reports to this effect.

The letters page of the *Dover Express* has been devoted to correspondence from anyone harbouring racist resentments or prejudice against foreigners. The paper has promoted such people as Paul James as spokesmen for the local community. An owner of a building and maintenance firm, James has boycotted any contracts concerning housing refugees.

Recently he announced his intention to stand as a candidate for the fascist British National Party in next year's council elections.

Another fascist group, the National Front, has organised two demonstrations in the town.

The local and national press coverage has been tantamount to incitement to racist violence. Three families of asylum-seekers have had their windows smashed. In a recent attack, a hurled object narrowly missed a child and fireworks were thrown through the window. The attackers daubed, 'We will burn you out' on the house. The address of one of the houses targeted had been printed in full by the *Daily*.

Labour-controlled Dover council has criticised leading figures in Tory-controlled Kent County Council for encouraging racism. But its criticisms have centred on demands to reduce the number of asylum seekers, and for those who remain to be dispersed to other parts of the country. It has welcomed the new measures to be introduced in the Immigration and Asylum Bill. Speaking on a local news station last month, local Labour MP Gwyn Prosser said, 'I'm glad it's coming forward as a Bill--as early as possible as far as I'm concerned in Dover. And I'm very pleased that a lot of the issues which people in Dover, people in Kent, raised with the Minister over the last 12 months have been incorporated into the White Paper.'

See Also:

Immigration and Asylum Bill turns refugees into pariahs
[17 December 1998]

Labour Government sets out to close Britain's borders to refugees
[30 July 1998]



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