Sangatte camp exposes brutal French and British asylum policy

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The efforts of a small number of refugees and migrants to find shelter and security are being met in Britain with a display of naked xenophobia.

In the eyes of the British bourgeoisie, a few thousand migrants fleeing war, poverty and repression and temporarily housed at the Sangatte transit camp on France's northern coast should be treated as an enemy, whose forces are massing as once did the armies of Napoleon and Hitler. In the eyes of their French counterparts, moreover, migrants should be denied any support or legal rights and left to risk ever more dangerous and desperate attempts to enter Britain.

"Ali, 17, is a foot soldier with the 1,000-strong army of the world's dispossessed who are laying desperate siege to the terminal from their base at the makeshift refugee camp at Sangatte, on the outskirts of Calais", said an August 24 article in the London *Times*. It was commenting on a report that Eurotunnel, the Anglo-French company that operates the Channel Tunnel, was to seek a writ forcing the closure of the camp, which is near its Coquelles freight terminal. The previous day the *Times* editorialised, "Through no fault of its own except function and location, Eurotunnel is at the frontline of Britain's defences against illegal immigration."

Opened in 1999 by the French government and run by the Red Cross, Sangatte is a former warehouse once used for the construction of the channel tunnel. It was taken over to provide basic accommodation for primarily Kurdish, Afghan, and Albanian refugees trying to enter Britain, because of the large numbers hitherto forced to sleep rough in the town's public parks.

The camp has only one lawyer, and is subjected to continual surveillance by the French riot police, the CRS. The warehouse and some portakabins constitute a buffer zone for the stateless, caught between two of the richest nations on earth—both of whom view them as an intolerable burden.

France rarely offers asylum and 90 percent of applications are rejected. Eurotunnel complains with some justification that the French authorities effectively turn a blind eye while refugees try to smuggle themselves into trucks, freight trains, cars, or risk even more dangerous means of crossing the 26 mile sea channel to England. Between August 1999 and December 2000, 29,320 people were handed over to the French authorities at the Coquelles terminal by Eurotunnel's security guards. Of these, some 3,016 were deported by the French government, while the rest were released to make their own way back to Sangatte, prior to another crossing attempt.

The dangers involved in such attempts were highlighted last week by the death of a Kosovan refugee traveling to Dover from Ostend, who jumped to his death from a high speed ferry in a bid to escape Hoverspeed security guards. He was the fourth migrant to be killed in recent months.

Migrants from Sangatte take similar risks every night, in the hope of eventually making it into England. The camp now contains around 1,200 people, although it was initially intended for around 400. Average time spent in Sangatte is now four weeks, up from seven days when the camp first opened.

The response of Britain's political establishment and the media to the terrible plight of the Sangatte refugees has been to insist that the racism of the French authorities must be more than matched by Britain. Otherwise it would pay a high price for being a "soft touch".

Such claims obscure the role already being played by Britain's draconian immigration and asylum legislation in creating the conditions for Sangatte to exist. With the advent of the Labour government in 1997, British policy towards migrants reached a level of brutality long aspired towards by the preceding Conservative administration. The immediate impulse for Eurotunnel seeking action to close down Sangatte was the extension by Labour in 1998 of the Carrier Liability Act from airlines to road hauliers. Under the act, companies can be fined £2,000 for every person found attempting to smuggle themselves into Britain on one of their vehicles. Lorry drivers and all manner of freight hauliers effectively became secondary arms of the immigration authorities. Last year Labour encouraged shipping company P&O Stena to extend searches from lorries to private cars. The company employed 40 new security staff, armed with carbon dioxide (CO_2) detectors, to screen 750,000 trucks and 1.5 million private cars. Refusal to accept screening would mean the vehicle could not travel.

Eurotunnel, and rail freight company EWS, have resorted to similar measures at their terminals on both side of the Channel. Access to Eurotunnel's Coquelles terminal is monitored by over 200 CCTV cameras. Every gate has a 24-hour guard, and the site is surrounded by 23 miles of razor wire. The loss making company has cited the costs of the security operation, and the danger to hauliers of being fined driving freight business to other terminals, as a significant pressures on its revenue. Many services are also delayed because of people being discovered hidden on trucks.

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Some refugees have even been discovered trying to walk along the tunnel. In taking out a writ against the French government over the Sangatte warehouse, Eurotunnel are trying to save themselves some of the costs associated with this substantial operation by driving migrants further away from Coquelles. The company has simultaneously launched an appeal in Britain against its inclusion, from March 1, in the Carriers Liability Act. They have won the support of the Tory Party.

As it has at every juncture, the response of the Labour government will be to step up its attacks on asylum seekers. In its response to a "Border Controls" report by the Parliamentary Home Affairs Committee published on March 28, the government explained that it is anxious to stop so-called "pull" immigration. These are defined as any factors that encourage refugees and migrants from war, poverty and political repression to seek safety in Britain.

Amongst such "pull" factors, the government lists the English language, access to cash welfare benefits (already curtailed), the slow speed of asylum application processing, the relatively low level of removals from the UK, and access, without identity requirements, to public services. All of these, it argues, make Britain more attractive to migrants than some other European countries.

Labour cannot do anything about the English language, but everything else is being targeted for special attention. The government aims to drastically increase the number and speed of people being deported. According to official figures, 7,600 failed asylum seekers were deported in 1999, but this rose to 9,000 in 2000 on top of 46,000 people turned back at points of entry. The government aims to increase deportations to 30,000 this year, 33,000 in 2002/3 and 37,000 in 2003/4. In their own words, "The target represents a major increase in removals, to a level not previously contemplated." The government intends a "major expansion" of the immigration detention programme and is inaugurating a network of reporting centres to allow all asylum seekers to be either locked up or tracked, from the moment of their arrival to their eventual deportation.

At the same time the government intends to tighten security, surveillance and intelligence gathering using the same methods deployed against drug trafficking. "Immigration Liaison Officers" are to be deployed to key points—from which refugees start their journeys—particularly Prague Airport in the Czech Republic, Paris and Calais in France. The government has called for "joined up" co-operation between all government agencies involved in processing immigration and asylum claims and greater use of criminal and passport authority databases to scan all entrants to the UK.

In addition to CO2 and X-ray scanners, "heartbeat monitors" should be developed to detect people hidden in cars and trucks, while resources should continually be directed to developing new detection technologies. The government is working with the British Airport Authority, British Airways, and Virgin Atlantic to introduce trial "biometric" scans on incoming passengers. In the last few days, the racist immigration controls introduced in Prague to stop Roma from attempting to escape harassment in the Czech Republic, which were temporarily removed following a public outcry, have been reintroduced.

As with Britain, successive French governments have tightened immigration rules since the 1970s. New visa requirements reduced the flow of visitors from countries whose population was deemed to be a "migratory risk" from 5.6 to 2.3 million between 1987 and 1994. Deportations increased and the power to arrest pending deportation and ID checks strengthened.

This reached a high point with the "zero immigration" policy of right wing interior minister Charles Pasqua, which, encouraged by racist rhetoric from the National Front of Jean Marie Le Pen, went so far as to deny legal status to foreign graduates accepting jobs already approved by French employers. Pasqua met with large scale opposition, culminating in the movements in support of the *sans papiers* [those without identity and work papers].

Large numbers of workers in France and throughout Europe have only forged legal documents or no legal status at all. An increasingly integrated apparatus of surveillance, detention, and expulsion is being constructed across the continent and undocumented sections of the working class find it ever more difficult to sustain a reasonable standard of living, move from one country to another, or even move about the country in which they currently stay. (One of the "pull" factors identified by Britain's Labour government is that, for historical reasons, Britain has no identity card system. It therefore remains somewhat easier to gain at least semi-legal status, and thereby access to public services without having to produce ID. Pressed by the committee to consider reviewing the introduction of entitlement cards for public services, the government cited only the difficulty of implementation and enforcement, and widespread public opposition as objections.)

The attitude towards asylum seekers of France's present Socialist Party government of Lionel Jospin was epitomised when the bulk carrier *East Sea*, carrying around 300 Kurdish refugees, including many children, beached itself on the Côte d'Azur, this February. The entire political establishment emitted a xenophobic howl against refugees who had risked their savings and their lives on a desperate journey on an unsafe ship run by gangsters. The Kurds were arrested, held in a special detention zone, and denied any collective asylum. For its part, the British government insisted that measures must be taken by the French authorities to prevent the Kurds reaching Sangatte.

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