

Britain: BBC documentary exposes abuse of asylum seekers

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Britain's immigration procedures, and the harsh treatment meted out to those who seek to enter the country were subjected to a damning indictment in a BBC One documentary entitled *Detention Undercover—The Real Story*, broadcast March 2.

The programme was an undercover exposé of the practises carried out by staff employed by Global Solutions Ltd. (GSL) at the Oakington Immigration Reception Centre, near Cambridge, and at Heathrow Airport, where the company owns a contract to transport asylum seekers. *Real Story* involved BBC undercover researchers Simon Boazman and Andy Pagnacco taking on employment with GSL at the Oakington centre and at the company's Heathrow Airport depot, respectively.

The programme included scenes in which security staff routinely made racist and derogatory statements. Staff are also seen engaging in violence against detainees and boasting about participating in further violence—including sexual abuse.

Among the GSL employees filmed by Boazman was Jason Martin, known to other staff at Oakington as "Wolfie." He was filmed entering the room of a detainee whose mental health was reportedly causing concern and shouting at him, "Get out of f***ing bed before I do you some damage."

When the detainee fails to move, Martin continues, "You just don't want to do it because I'm white. And you think you're not going to do anything 'cos a white person tells you what to do. Well I'm afraid you're wrong. My great-grandfather shot your great-grandfather and nicked his f***ing country off you for 200 years. I'm not to be f***ed about with."

He is then shown tipping the detainee out of bed and ordering him to get his breakfast.

Further undercover filming recorded two staff members at Oakington asking about the asylum seekers in their care, "What good are these f***ers to society?"

At Heathrow Airport, Andy Pagnacco spoke to a GSL employee named Jalil Chaudhri, who boasted that he had punched detainees and ignored standard safety measures outlined in the company's training handbook known as Control and Restraint (C & R). Chaudhri, who had worked for GSL for 18 months, said to Pagnacco, "I've smacked in their faces when no one's looking. I've busted their noses." He also boasted that he had had sexual encounters with detainees.

Brian Pearce, a Prison Officers' Association trade union representative for GCL staff at the Heathrow depot, was similarly abusive against asylum seekers, and at one point boasted to the undercover reporter that his union defended staff accused of racism and violence even though "we know they done it."

GCL has suspended 15 staff as a result of the accusations made in the programme, pending the outcome of an internal inquiry. The company said that 3 other members of staff had previously resigned in unrelated circumstances, and another had subsequently quit.

What lies behind the routine abuse and brutality?

The documentary sought to portray such appalling treatment as the result of a few bad apples and/or staff ignoring training and not following procedures and guidelines. More fundamentally, its main thrust was that the abuses were the outcome of government privatisation of services such as the detention and removal of immigrants. The effort to run asylum procedures on the cheap, it suggested, meant that due care had not been taken in staff recruitment.

Similarly, media reaction in the main condemned the abusive staff involved, whilst presenting their behaviour as an aberration.

Such claims do not withstand scrutiny. In the first instance, GSL is no novice in the field of asylum and immigration. The transnational corporation, based in Worcestershire, England, employs around 8,000 staff in the UK, South Africa and Australia. It has provided immigration services for successive British governments for the past 15 years and currently carries out 90,000 detainee movements per year for the Immigration Service, with more than 600,000 prisoner movements annually in England and Wales.

The treatment of asylum seekers has been influenced fundamentally by the political climate. The ruling elite has pursued a deliberate policy of restricting the right to asylum as part of a general offensive against democratic rights, whilst demonising those seeking to enter the country as scroungers, parasites and criminals.

It was in this context that the use of so-called reception centres was introduced by the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002. The new system allowed the holding of

individuals seeking asylum for up to six months.

The Oakington Immigration Reception Centre is the only such facility that has been opened thus far. Located on the site of a former Royal Air Force barracks and opened in March 2000, it was originally designed to hold 400 asylum seekers.

Its official title of “reception centre” belies its real purpose, which is that of a prison in all but name. The centre is surrounded by 12-foot-high fences topped with barbed wire. This is reinforced with CCTV cameras and regular security staff patrols. The detainees can move around the centre only under guard. This centre has been established to “detain” people, none of whom have been sent there for committing a criminal offence.

Human rights groups such as the local Cambridgeshire Against Refugee Detention (CARD) have consistently raised concerns about the inhumane system at Oakington and called for its closure. Oakington holds asylum seekers who are often traumatised and very disoriented. Of particular concern is the treatment of single women and children in such facilities. The centre can supposedly accommodate up to 100 women and dependent children in what are overcrowded communal dormitories. In this “family environment,” fathers are separated from their families at night and must stay in the men’s dormitories.

Such are the conditions at the centre that within days of it opening, 6 Romanian asylum seekers fled and a total of 45 had escaped by December 2001. Some 40 asylum seekers held a hunger strike in July and August 2003. A further 21 detainees escaped from Oakington in August and September 2003, and a total of 84 fled that year.

In November 2004, Chief Inspector of Prisons Anne Owers criticised Oakington for failing to look after vulnerable detainees. Older children were receiving little or no education, and there were few opportunities for sports, she said, pointing to the example of one child who was detained just before sitting his GCSE school examinations.

Owers said, “It remains our view that the detention of children should be exceptional, and only for very short periods.” In fact, of the 41 children at the centre at that time, 15 had been held for between one and four weeks. One child had been held for 21 weeks the previous year.

A report, *No place for a child*, published this month by the Save the Children charity, estimated that 2,000 children are held in such reception and removal centres each year. The organisation called for the practice to be abolished.

Oakington also plays an important role for the government in that it is able to “fast track” applications of asylum seekers in just nine hours. This has enabled the state to forcibly deport asylum seekers at an ever-faster rate. Increasingly, asylum seekers are sent to Oakington, where their claims can be summarily dismissed, and they can be deported with no right of appeal.

In December 2003, then-Home Secretary David Blunkett

said, “The success of fast-track processing at Oakington has reduced by three-quarters applications from those countries we have designated as safe. We intend to apply for planning permission to extend our use of the centre until 2006, alongside an expansion of the fast-track process at Harmondsworth.”

The allegations contained in the BBC documentary are the latest in a steady flow of allegations of racism, intimidation and violence towards asylum seekers at a number of centres, including Yarl’s Wood, Harmondsworth and the Dungavel asylum centre in Scotland.

Once again, it is the official parties and the media that have created an atmosphere conducive to such abuses.

Already in the run-up to an anticipated May 5 General Election, both the Labour Party and the Conservatives are competing over which can put forward the most right-wing anti-immigrant platform. They have chosen this as their main campaign strategy in order to scapegoat asylum seekers and immigrants for the social devastation caused by both parties’ big-business policies.

In this, they have been given the support of much of the media, which continuously demonises immigrants and asylum seekers. The daily TV and radio schedules are replete with news items, documentaries, dramas, talk shows and radio phone-ins devoted to the issue of immigration and the “threat” that asylum seekers pose to the notion of “Britishness” and “British culture.”

Every day, the tabloid press runs stories threatening that the UK is in danger of being “flooded” by bogus asylum applicants. Just recently, Rupert Murdoch’s *Sun* newspaper called for a “war” so as to stop what it describes as a “flood of Gypsies” into Britain.

It is in this putrid atmosphere that the abuses revealed by the BBC at Oakington can be carried out. In the final analysis, the racist and brutal thugs depicted in the programme were essentially acting out what now passes for good coin in official circles.



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