

France: Brutal eviction of migrants from Calais encampment

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At dawn Tuesday morning, 600 police officers invaded the makeshift camp near Calais, France, known as the “jungle,” which had been home to some 800 undocumented immigrants, mostly Afghans trying to emigrate to Britain. The police violently pushed aside 150 British and French migrant rights campaigners who tried to form a human chain to prevent the eviction of the immigrants. They then forcibly removed the migrants, half of them children and teenagers, distraught and frightened, amidst scenes of great distress.

Army units were being held in reserve near the Channel Tunnel entrance. The migrants offered little resistance, but some attempted to defend the camp’s mosque where there was also a grave.

The purpose of this brutal action, carried out with the full support of the British government and the European Union, and with full media coverage, was to terrorise all those seeking refuge from privation, war and persecution in Asia and Africa, to deter them from attempting to enter the EU.

It is also a signal to the most reactionary forces in the state and society designed to ready them for repression, at home and abroad, of the growing numbers of victims of the economic crisis. The MRAP (Movement against Racism and for Friendship between the Peoples) condemned the raid, “which reduces to utter helplessness men, women and minors who have already gone through so much” and which “merely serves to maintain a dangerous xenophobic climate in our country.”

The neo-fascist National Front leader Jean-Marie Le Pen commented that “France is a jungle everywhere.”

Once all of the migrants and protesters had been moved on beyond the perimeter of the “jungle,” hundreds of officers began a mass clean-up operation, using bulldozers, chainsaws and flame-throwers to destroy all the makeshift shelters.

Many of the migrants, knowing that the well-publicized raid would be taking place, had fled the camp. They awaited the police gathered behind banners written in English and Pashto. One read, “We need shelter and protection. We want asylum and peace. The jungle is our home.” Another read, “Give us asylum in France. We want accommodation. We don’t want to stay in the jungle.” The immigrant support groups chanted, “No border. No nation. No deportation.”

A total of 278 persons were arrested, including two support group members. The 135 minors detained were sent to five “specialised centres,” according to the authorities. The support groups say these are establishments for juvenile delinquents.

Eric Besson, minister of immigration and former Socialist Party member who defected to Sarkozy during his 2007 presidential election campaign, oversaw the police operation. He told the press that since January, some 180 clandestine immigrants had chosen voluntary repatriation and 170 had started proceedings to request asylum, of which 50 had received provisional residence permits.

Besson warned, “For those who continue to refuse these proposals, we are considering a procedure of forced repatriation to the country of origin.” His reference to asylum requests is particularly cynical. Keith Best of the British Immigration Advisory Service told the press, “The French are not playing their part in allowing people to claim asylum in Calais despite their obligations under the Refugee Convention.”

Britain has ruled out taking in the migrants. Alan Johnson, the British home secretary, said genuine refugees should apply for asylum in the country where they entered the EU, while those escaping persecution should return home. “The measures that we have put in place are not only there to prevent illegal immigration but also to stop people-trafficking,” Johnson said. “We are working with the French, not only to strengthen our shared border but that of Europe as a whole.”

Johnson pledged continuing support for the French action, saying that the UK Border Agency officers “already work day and night alongside the French authorities to secure the border at Calais.” Britain has recently given France £15 million to this end.

Johnson’s cynicism was reinforced by British immigration minister Phil Woolas, who said that the Calais migrants must be illegal. He argued that otherwise they would have claimed asylum in France or the EU country where they had first arrived. But as the *Guardian* reports, “Greece, the most likely transit country for many in Calais, accepted fewer than one percent of its asylum claims last year. Italy has raised international concern by summarily intercepting migrant boats at sea and forcing thousands to return to Libya without even a glance at their refugee claims.”

These actions are a deliberate flouting of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention's key provision—known as non-refoulement, which means that no one claiming asylum shall be returned to a country where he or she might be persecuted. A second requirement is that proper consideration be given to each claim and that no one be prosecuted for entering a country illegally.

Besson promised that more squats in the area would be gradually cleared. Migrants from Iraq, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Somalia and other countries have been living in empty buildings and shacks all along the Nord-Pas-de-Calais coast, hoping to stow away on trucks heading to Britain.

The French media and “left” have given little account of the conditions that are creating the massive migratory movements. According to *Guardian*, there were 10 million refugees and 200 million migrants last year alone.

An article by Philip Johnston in the British *Daily Telegraph* September 22 describes the conditions facing these people: “What they all want is to get to Britain; and after braving the blazing sands of the Sahara, risking their lives crossing the Mediterranean or spending days cramped and hungry in the back of a lorry from central Asia, they are not about to be thwarted by 22 miles of English Channel.

“Across Europe, shanty towns are springing up.... Climate change, population growth, water shortages, famine and war will all drive more and more people from their homelands and towards Europe....

“The Mediterranean coasts of Spain and France are seeing a large rise in numbers. In 2008, an estimated 70,000 tried to cross from North Africa. Corpses are sometimes washed up on the beaches, the result of ill-fated attempts to cross the sea from Africa, often in small craft unable to withstand the elements.”

The *Guardian* reports on the plight of Ahmed Toeb, a young farmer from north of Kabul, who said he had tried night after night to stop lorries in an effort to make it to Britain, running alongside them on the motorway. “He had succeeded a few times, only to be stopped by French border police. The night before the raid he heard rumours that the police would come. He hid and saw men fleeing. ‘Some friends of mine got taken, one was 14. I don’t know where they are now. I am frightened for them.’ He will not stop trying to get to Britain. If he tries to claim asylum in France he fears he will only be sent back to Afghanistan.”

Aid workers and volunteers, who themselves risk fines of up to €75,000 and five years imprisonment for giving assistance to illegal immigrants—*le délit de solidarité*, the crime of human solidarity—have pointed out that actions such as the Calais raid will only displace the problem. Many who avoided the raid are now sleeping under bridges and in abandoned buildings.

Jean-Claude Lenoir, a leader of the Salam support group, explained their presence at the encampment: “We wanted to show symbolically our solidarity with the migrants. You can’t

carry out a war in Afghanistan and treat the Afghans here with such scant dignity.”

So-called left parties in France made a series of statements on the raid. The *Courrier Picard* quotes the Left Party of Jean-Luc Mélenchon and the Communist Party (PCF) saying respectively that it was a “cruel and obscene spectacle” and “a police-media operation.” Socialist Party First Secretary Martine Aubry declared, “It’s a totally inhuman act.” The Greens issued a statement saying that “this highly media-orientated operation is just a political show,” with the regional elections of 2010 in mind.

All these parties were in the Jospin Plural Left government that joined the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2002. They continue to support the present colonial-style military intervention of French troops alongside those of NATO, which are contributing to the ravaged conditions in the country and driving millions into exile. With many dying on the way, some end up in Calais and will continue to do so.

The Plural Left government enforced the anti-immigration laws that made these migrants illegal. The Socialist Party’s current policy on immigration is virtually indistinguishable from that of the Sarkozy government.

Jospin worked with the British government to make the passage to England as difficult and hazardous as possible, thus creating the pile-up of migrants seeking residence in England at the Sangatte Red Cross Centre, closed in 2002 at the request of the Blair government. Jospin accused Britain of being too “soft” on asylum and *l’Humanité*, the PCF daily, criticised Sarkozy’s decision to “shut the Sangatte centre without the problem being sorted out in Great Britain.”

In September 2001, Jospin’s interior minister Daniel Vaillant issued a joint statement with the British Home Secretary David Blunkett, calling for swifter “progress to agree and implement common EU procedures for dealing with asylum seekers” aimed at inhibiting “asylum shopping.” (See “Britain and France seek tougher measures against refugees”)

The callous treatment of the Calais refugees and their children is a sharp warning to the working class of Europe of the repressive violence being prepared by the EU against all those seeking to protect themselves and their families from the social destruction imposed on them by the European states on behalf of European imperialism.



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