Britain: Irish Travellers fight Dale Farm eviction in Essex

Julie Hyland
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The High Court in London is to rule on Friday whether Irish traveller families on a site in Essex can be evicted by Basildon Council.

Dale Farm, near Basildon in southeast England, is the largest illegal Irish travellers' site in the UK. It has been settled for 10 years on a six-acre site owned by the travellers, but only half the site has planning permission.

In the last months, Basildon Council set out to evict 80 families living on the 51 unauthorised pitches in one of the largest mass evictions ever carried out in England. Many of the residents have refused to leave. They have been forced to pitch illegally, they argue, because planning departments and councils systematically discriminate against travellers.

If Council threats to cut off electricity and send in bailiffs to forcibly eject residents and remove their caravans are acted upon, it will gravely affect the health and welfare of the community.

Children on the site will lose their schooling, and families will lose access to health and social facilities. There are a number of seriously ill people, including cancer patients and one woman, Mary Flynn, who relies on a nebuliser (used to administer medication in the form of a mist inhaled into the lungs).

Hundreds of campaigners—including many students—have turned out to support the travellers, helping to build barricades around the farm. Young people have padlocked their necks to doors, to prevent bailiffs gaining access.

Various religious leaders and the actress Vanessa Redgrave are among the most high-profile supporters of the residents. The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination has denounced the planned eviction.

Former UN adviser on forced eviction Professor Yves Cabannes went to Dale Farm last week where he said the British government was violating international human rights law. This was on three counts, he said: "the right to adequate housing, the right to be defended from forced eviction and discrimination."

Cabannes pointed out Basildon Council was guilty of failing in its obligation to provide adequate pitches to travellers. "The people who are abusing the law are the council, not the travellers," he said. "The council is not fulfilling its duties."

"We are used to see millions of people losing their homes in Zimbabwe, China and Nigeria—how is one country unable to solve the problem of 51 pitches?"

Council leader Tony Ball has argued that the council is simply "upholding the law of our country" and ensuring that it is applied "fairly".

But as noted by Cabannes, Basildon—and many other areas in the country—routinely fail to provide sufficient legal pitches to travellers, discriminating against them.

With an estimated 300,000 travellers in the UK, the number of pitches available is short by 4,000, potentially affecting 25,000 people.

The BBC reported that of the 30 local authorities it contacted across England, virtually all of them had no places available at all. Where travellers file planning applications to develop needed sites—many on land they own—more than 90 percent are initially rejected.

Dale Farm residents say they have proposed alternative sites in the vicinity and put in three planning applications to develop smaller sites for those losing their pitches in the evictions, but these look likely to be rejected. One has failed already.

The council has in any case made clear that the families will not be allowed to settle anywhere in the area. Ball said that Basildon would "absolutely not" provide alternative accommodation for those evicted.

Making clear that the travellers are to be harassed out of Basildon, Ball said, "We will keep on moving them until they find a proper site."

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He suggested that Liverpool—hundreds of miles away in the northwest of England—might provide some pitches.

Other councils in the vicinity have made clear they are preparing to remove anyone from Dale Farm that tries to settle in their districts. North Herts District Council and South Cambs District Council said they were making preparations to prevent the evicted families attempting to settle.

Traveller Kathleen McCarthy told the BBC, "They are treating us like animals, we never wanted to break this law, we had meetings, we begged Tony Ball, we wanted a peaceful solution, we wanted to find a piece of land but they couldn't find anything.

"We identified land and still they said 'no'. No matter how we try not to break the law we will never be able to win this."

On Monday, the High Court granted an 11th hour reprieve against eviction—preventing the council from shutting off supplies and entering the site. Despite the celebrations of residents and their supporters, however, it is likely that the High Court will approve Basildon's application on Friday.

That the Essex council is prepared to spend £18 million—involving hundreds of police, bailiffs and others—to evict just 80 families from land formerly used as a scrapyard makes clear that its decision is a political one—and one fully backed by the government.

Jan Jarab, regional representative of the UN high commissioner for human rights, said that an offer by the commission to negotiate a solution at Dale Farm had been rejected by the government.

"There was communication between the British government and our headquarters," Jarab said, "but it was made clear to us that we would receive a letter that that offer was rejected."

"It is terribly sad and I am disappointed. A forced eviction is a dramatic event for the people concerned."

Prime Minister David Cameron has publicly endorsed the actions of Basildon. Just as importantly, the cost of the eviction is being assisted with more than £5 million of funds from the Home Office and the communities department.

The policing operation alone is expected to cost £10 million, as officers camp out in neighbouring fields awaiting the order and police helicopters fly regularly overhead. Fully £8 million is being paid to private companies, contracted to make the eviction by the council.

The sums paid out—under conditions in which many local authorities are cutting budgets—must be set in the context of the government's Localism Bill currently before parliament. Trailed as handing "greater powers to councils and neighbourhoods and…local communities," it marks a major assault on housing rights—especially for the poorest and most vulnerable.

More "flexible" tenures are to be introduced for those in social housing, and local authorities will be able to limit those who can apply. Travellers are especially affected by the new measures, which will ban retrospective planning permission for unauthorised sites—punishable by heavy fines.

The Localism Bill abolishes the requirement for Regional Strategies planning for travellers' sites, under which local authorities were meant to identify land for such purposes. Instead, the decision will be made by individual local authorities. When this is balanced against plans to enable local residents to instigate referendum to veto or approve council decisions, it is clear that the number of travellers' sites available will decrease still further—especially in richer areas of the country, with higher land and house prices.

More fundamentally, in targeting the travellers' site in Essex, Britain's political establishment is sending a message that it is marching in lock step with the right across Europe in deliberately stirring up racism and xenophobia. Last year, the French government of Nicholas Sarkozy pushed through the mass deportation of Roma. In Italy, the Czech Republic, Hungary and elsewhere, Roma have been singled out as targets for persecution.

Along with the anti-Muslim propaganda that is now the trademark of every government in Europe and its official parties, these are expressions of the noxious poison being developed and encouraged by the bourgeoisie.

Under conditions in which the crisis of capitalism is producing an economic and social catastrophe for working people in Britain and across Europe, the resort to scapegoating Roma, other travellers and Muslims for declining living standards bears more than a passing resemblance to the Nazi period in Germany.

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