

Britain: Conservatives and Labour step up witch-hunt against immigrants

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Last week UK Prime Minister David Cameron made a major speech on immigration, further stoking up the vicious witch-hunt against migrant workers that has dominated British politics recently.

Cameron said the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government was pledged to end Britain's reputation as a "soft touch" for immigrants by restricting their rights to state benefits, National Health Service (NHS) treatment and social housing. Immigration Minister Mark Harper declared, "We want to make sure our rules are among the toughest in the world."

The rules in Britain are already amongst the toughest in the world. Immigration of unskilled workers from countries outside the European Union (EU) is virtually nonexistent and there are only about 10,000 skilled workers coming from non-EU countries each year—half the cap the government imposed in 2010.

The vast majority of the 2 million net migrants to the UK over the last few years are from the eight eastern European countries that joined the EU in 2004. Their populations believed Western promises of a golden future following the collapse of Stalinism and took advantage of EU accession to find work elsewhere on the continent. The exodus was encouraged by the actions of their ruling elites who, acceding to all the demands of the EU, cut taxes for the rich, deregulated markets and destroyed the welfare system, resulting in rising unemployment, joblessness and economic insecurity.

Next year, the citizens of Bulgaria and Romania will be eligible to work within the EU without restrictions, although Germany, Britain, France and other EU powers are attempting to stall the process. Bulgaria and Romania are the two poorest countries in the EU, with half of their population at risk of poverty.

The claim that up to 400,000 Romanians and Bulgarians would come to Britain next year was at the centre of the campaign waged by the anti-European and anti-immigration United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) during the Eastleigh by-election last month.

In his speech Cameron levelled his sights at these European migrant workers, accusing them of "benefit tourism." He declared the government would end the right of workers from the European Economic Area (EEA)—the 26 European Union countries plus Norway, Liechtenstein and Iceland—to Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and other benefits after six months unless they have a "genuine chance" of finding work and can prove they have been trying. In fact, just 13,000 EU migrant workers have claimed JSA.

Cameron then attacked immigrants for supposedly taking advantage of cheap public housing. He said the "culture of something for nothing" on social housing would be ended and a new "local residency test" will prevent migrant workers from joining a waiting list for social housing unless they have lived in an area for up to five years.

The government's own housing minister, Mark Prisk, pointed out recently that, "Most foreign nationals who have recently come to England are not eligible for an allocation of social housing. Broadly speaking, European Economic Area nationals are eligible if they are working, self-sufficient, or have a permanent right of residence in the UK (after five years' lawful residence in the UK). Other foreign nationals are not eligible for social housing unless they have been granted leave to enter or remain in the UK with recourse to public funds (for example, people granted refugee status or humanitarian protection)."

Cameron also launched an attack on "health tourism" by announcing plans to restrict access to free health

care for some visitors, tourists and temporary residents who were previously exempt and introduce a prepayment or insurance scheme. He said the NHS would be made to collect charges. However, the Department of Health's own figures show that last year foreign nationals were charged £33 million for hospital treatment.

Cameron also announced the doubling of fines for hiring illegal immigrants to £20,000 per worker and landlords fined for renting to them. "When it comes to illegal immigrants we are rolling up that red carpet and showing them the door," the prime minister declared.

Other measures include denying migrants who fail to learn English the right to jobless benefits and new rules on the admission of the children of migrants to state schools.

Cameron's tirade against immigration follows similar comments made by Labour Party leader Ed Miliband while expounding his Tory-derived "One Nation" vision for Labour earlier this year. He criticised what he termed "uncontrolled" levels of immigration, while advocating a strengthening of national identity. He apologised for the last Labour government, which had "got it wrong on immigration" by not imposing transitional controls on workers from the Eastern European nations in 2004.

The Labour Party is championing "maximum controls" on immigrants from Romania and Bulgaria, under the demand of "British jobs for British workers" and calling for new anti-immigrant measures, including new tests for EU migrants claiming unemployment benefits, the removal of child welfare entitlement for immigrants and enforcing the use of English. The themes raised by Miliband—flag-waving nationalism, anti-immigrant chauvinism, support for the free market and a hostility to what remains of Britain's welfare state—are at the core of the Blue Labour faction created in 2009 based on "flag, faith and family."

At the same time Cameron was making his speech, Liberal Democrat Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg announced his party was abandoning its manifesto commitment of an amnesty for illegal immigrants and called for a discriminatory £1,000 bond for visitors from "high-risk" countries.

Writing in the *Daily Telegraph*, Labour's Frank Field and Conservative Nicholas Soames demanded greater restrictions on European immigration, claiming this

was necessary to help Britain's young unemployed. The joint chairmen of the cross-party balanced migration group argued, "With one million 18- to 24-year-olds out of work, allowing this to continue does not make sense, quite apart from the increasing pressure on our infrastructure."

The anti-immigrant and nationalist demagoguery being spouted by the likes of UKIP is being taken up by the mainstream parties to divert mounting social anger over unemployment, poverty and budget cuts in a reactionary direction, and to divert blame from the ruling elite for implementing the deepest austerity measures since the 1930s.

Depressed wages and living standards are a product of the savage cuts imposed by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, following the Labour-initiated £1 trillion-plus bailout of the banks. There have been non-stop pay cuts, pay freezes, the slashing of welfare and rising unemployment and an enormous housing crisis, with nearly 1.8 million households in England on local authority housing waiting lists.

Workers should reject the demonisation of immigrants. Against the efforts of big business to divide and rule, the defence of migrant workers must be placed at the centre of a revolt against the austerity measures of the ruling elite.



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