

British PM Cameron's attack on immigrants

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British Prime Minister David Cameron's attack this week on Bulgarian and Romanian migrants is only the latest anti-immigrant diatribe delivered for the purpose of polluting the political atmosphere in Britain and Europe.

Cameron announced measures against migrants to the UK (See: "UK Prime Minister Cameron plays the anti-immigrant card"), which he claimed were aimed against "benefit tourism." Under new rules, migrants will not be entitled, as a right, to out-of-work benefits. They will also be subject to deportation if they are found begging or sleeping rough.

The prime minister's intervention came as European Union (EU) rules placing restrictions on Bulgarians and Romanians working in the UK were about to expire. The same restrictions are set to lapse as well in Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Malta, Spain and the Netherlands.

The lapsing of the EU restrictions has unleashed a hysterical press campaign in the UK, with dire warnings that Britain is about to be swamped by Eastern Europeans. The press has centred on the fact that Britain's paltry welfare benefit levels are still twice the average wage in Bulgaria.

On the same day that he announced the new anti-immigrant measures, Cameron published a column in the *Financial Times* entitled "Free movement within Europe needs to be less free". He wrote: "It is time for a new settlement which recognises that free movement is a central principle of the EU, but it cannot be a completely unqualified one... We need to do the same with welfare. For example, free movement should not be about exporting child benefit."

Cameron's statements evoked a mild rebuke from European Commission President José Manuel Barroso, who said he told Cameron that "free movement is a fundamental treaty principle that must be upheld."

Coming from such a figure, this is rank hypocrisy.

There is little of substance separating Cameron's approach to immigration from that of any other major European leader.

Cameron's proposal to bar migrants from receiving benefits until they have been resident in the UK for three months is already in place in the Netherlands. The new Christian Democratic/Social Democratic grand coalition government in Germany is committed to a crackdown on migrants for "unjust claims of social security benefits." The French Socialist Party government is proposing repressive controls on temporary cross-border migrant workers.

There are already countless restrictions in place throughout Europe on migrant labour. However, due to the European Union's *raison d'être* as a free trade area, free movement of labour is enshrined in the EU's treaties. It is beneficial for major corporations seeking access to either specialised skilled labour or cheap unskilled labour.

That is why Cameron's focus has been on restricting access to welfare benefit entitlement, rather than the right of residency. Citing this, Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, the leader of the Conservative Party's coalition partner, the Liberal Democrats, insisted that the government's proposals were compatible with EU law.

Cameron's scare-mongering is echoed across the official political spectrum. On the right, anti-immigrant rhetoric is the staple of the United Kingdom Independence Party and similar tendencies throughout Europe. But the unanimity of all sections of the ruling elite in scape-goating immigrants for the consequences of cuts that are destroying social services and driving millions into poverty is epitomised by the opposition British Labour Party.

Leading Labour politicians have moved to outflank the government in making an appeal to anti-immigrant sentiment. Former Labour Home Secretary Jack Straw

said that Labour's decision in 2004 not to impose restrictions on Eastern European migrants was a "spectacular mistake."

Another former Labour Home Secretary, David Blunkett, recently insisted that "We have got to change the behaviour and the culture" of the Roma community in the UK if a violent backlash against them is to be avoided.

David Goodhart, the founder of the pro-Labour *Prospect* magazine and a director of the Demos think tank, has asserted, without foundation, that 1.5 million migrants have entered the UK labour market—a figure 50 percent higher than that cited by Cameron. He has proposed that Britain take immigrants only from countries that have an income per head that is 75 percent of the EU average—a proposal that would exclude Greece, Poland, Portugal, Lithuania, Latvia and, of course, Bulgaria and Romania.

Not to be outdone, Labour's Shadow Home Secretary Yvette Cooper responded to Cameron's diatribe by declaring that the prime minister was still "playing catch-up" with her party, which had made the same proposals eight months ago.

Official political discourse is being shifted ever further to the right, not because the far right are capturing the public mood, but because they are blazing a trail that the main political parties are more than ready to follow.

The major impulse for both international migration and migration within the EU—especially from Southern and Eastern Europe—is the devastating decline in social conditions. The EU has played a decisive role in this process, through its imposition of austerity measures and through various moves by the major European governments and corporations to drive down wages and to gut social provision.

Maria Damanaki, a Greek European commissioner, said earlier this year: "The strategy of the European Commission over the past year-and-a-half or two has been to reduce the labour costs in all European countries in order to improve the competitiveness of European companies over the rivals from Eastern Europe and Asia."

Damanaki is a leading figure and parliamentary deputy for PASOK, the Greek social democratic party, which has played a critical role in imposing the dictates of Greece's banking creditors over the past four years.

As a result of years of brutal austerity, the wages of workers in Eastern Europe have been driven down to starvation levels. Bulgaria is the poorest country in the EU, with an official monthly average wage of just €350.

But this is not a purely Eastern European phenomenon. The unrelenting attacks on British workers since the 2008 global financial crash by both the Labour government and the current coalition have seen living standards falling for a longer period than at any time since 1870.

The Socialist Equality Party stands for the right of workers to live and work wherever they please and for their free movement throughout the continent and internationally. The precondition for the defence of the rights of workers in any country is their solidarity and unity in struggle with the workers of all other countries. At the heart of the anti-immigrant agitation is a calculated drive by the ruling classes to divert social anger away from them and split the working class along national, racial, ethnic and religious lines.

The EU is not an instrument for defending the democratic and social rights of any workers, whether native-born or immigrant. It exists solely to facilitate whatever big business demands to reap profits at the expense of the wages, jobs and livelihoods of working people. The defence of workers' living standards and social rights requires the launching of a continent-wide mass movement of working people against the European Union and for the overthrow of capitalism and establishment of workers' governments within the framework of a United Socialist States of Europe.



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