Anti-immigrant campaign intensifies in Britain

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Seizing on the lifting of temporary controls on the movement of Romanians and Bulgarians seeking work across Europe on January 1, the British media and political establishment have stepped up their denunciation of migrants.

The controls, put in place on Romania and Bulgaria when they joined the European Union (EU) in 2007, were also lifted in eight other countries that imposed them at the time, including Germany and France.

Amid lurid claims of hordes of foreigners descending on Britain to take jobs and claim social welfare as "benefit tourists," the government rushed through draconian changes to welfare benefits in mid-December. These prevent immigrants claiming jobless benefit for three months and threaten them with the cut-off of all support after six months out of work. In the absence of a job, migrants can be banned from the country for one year.

This came in the wake of moves to charge migrants to use healthcare services, including emergency care. Immigrants seeking access to a GP (general practitioner) will be called upon to contribute financially.

The campaign was driven by the most far-right elements within the governing Conservative Party, as well as the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). Ninety Conservative back-bench MPs urged Prime Minister David Cameron to maintain Britain's controls on migrant labour from Bulgaria and Romania under an EU provision which permits restrictions on the freedom of movement if this prevents significant labour market disturbances.

Cameron indicated that part of his government's ongoing renegotiation of Britain's relationship with the EU could be a reconsideration of the right of free movement of people. He suggested that unrestricted immigration from other EU states should only be allowed if they have reached a similar economic level to the UK, and that restrictions should remain in place for other countries.

The scapegoating of immigrants is taking place across the continent. In Germany, conservative Chancellor Angela Merkel announced the creation of a cross-department investigative committee to deal with immigration, after an agreement was reached between her Christian Democrats (CDU) and the Social Democrats, partners in the coalition. The debate in Germany has been no less hostile, with Elmar Brok, a leading CDU member in the European Parliament, urging that all immigrants from Romania and Bulgaria should be fingerprinted and that anyone coming to claim welfare benefits "must be sent back home quickly."

The immigrant issue is being used by Britain's Conservative-Liberal Democrat government to press forward with further attacks on the welfare system, public services and wages. Proposals have been made to reform benefits along the lines of a contributory system, under which it would be necessary to have paid taxes before receiving any social support. This would not only affect new migrants, but also increasing numbers of workers, particularly young people, who have no prospect of gaining genuine employment due to the deepest economic crisis since the 1930s and the bailout of the financial elite.

As a *Daily Telegraph* article on this issue declared, "the UK must reform its welfare system to make it less easy to exploit. It makes no sense that lifelong taxpayers should generously support those who have just arrived."

Similarly in healthcare, the government is pushing for the NHS to become a virtual subsidiary of the UK border agency, enforcing punitive charges and levies on those deemed ineligible to receive free care.

In the spring, measures are to be implemented compelling landlords renting properties to report the immigration status of their tenants. Fines will be imposed on those who fail to inform the government with the necessary information, or for giving accommodation to "illegal" immigrants.

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While the reactionary framework of the immigration "debate" has been accepted by the entire political establishment, there have been concerns raised regarding the extreme and aggressive language used by some politicians and the impact the clampdown on immigration could have on Britain's international reputation and competitiveness against its economic rivals. Sections of business have pointed out the valuable source of cheap labour provided by immigration from eastern European countries where the impoverishment of the entire working class has been imposed with the full collaboration of the trade unions.

The most despicable role has been played by the Labour Party and its allies in what passes for the left-liberal media establishment. Labour has embraced entirely the right-wing chauvinist and nationalist language which has dominated public discourse, and sought to outdo the Conservatives with pledges to tackle excessive immigration.

Labour leader Ed Miliband has stated repeatedly that the last Labour government let immigration get "out of control" and that the same mistake will not be made again. In December, he accused the government of being "half-baked" on immigration.

Miliband's longstanding aim has been to shift Labour sharply to the right in order to assume the mantle of "one nation" Conservatism. He has committed the party to imposing stricter restrictions on immigration, and strengthening the requirement that immigrants speak English.

Writing in the *Sunday Independent* last weekend, Miliband attacked immigrants as the source of the social crisis facing working people, declaring, "Unless we act to change our economy, low-skill immigration risks making the problems of the cost of living crisis worse for those at the sharp end."

In an interview on January 1, as the first new arrivals from Romania and Bulgaria were pictured as headline news, Labour's immigration spokesman, David Hanson, denounced the government's failure to "protect" British workers.

This was backed by Shadow Home Secretary Yvette Cooper, who claimed that the main problem facing working people was the undercutting of British workers by immigrants on low wages, and that the answer to this was the enforcement of the current meagre minimum wage more strictly for British workers.

The *Guardian* has taken on the task of concealing the explicitly right-wing character of Labour on immigration. An article by Peter Wilby entitled "Labour can end the hostility to immigration on the left" sought to turn reality on its head by blaming the anti-immigrant chauvinism stoked by Britain's ruling elite on working people.

According to Wilby, the Labour leadership represented the enlightened few who had embraced multiculturalism and the benefits of migration. But they were held back by the backward views of the working class. Wilby asserts, "Labour has always been an uneasy alliance of middle-class liberals, who usually hold most leadership positions, and the party's working-class supporters who, if not consistently illiberal, tend not to meet the exacting standards of Hampstead or Islington dinner tables."

Showing a total disregard for the experience of millions of workers with Labour over recent decades, Wilby claimed, "The liberal leadership gets away with minimal restrictions on immigration, anti-racism laws, abolition of capital punishment, homosexual law reform and other policies that (at least initially) lack mass appeal, as long as it delivers higher wages, better public services and improved working conditions."

Such arguments reflect only the contempt in which the working class is held by privileged middle class layers like Wilby. Attributing anti-immigrant sentiment to the working class is the stock-in-trade of numerous Labour politicians and their apologists. It provides a means of justifying measures to divide working people and divert attention away from the real source of the deepening social and economic crisis produced by the brutal social attacks of the ruling elite to make workers pay for capitalism's deepening crisis.

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