

France: Calais mayor demands crackdown on migrants, threatens to block port

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Calais mayor Natacha Bouchart of France's right-wing Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) has threatened Britain that she will blockade Calais harbor unless the government in London helps fund Calais' repression of immigrants trapped in the city trying to reach Britain. Bouchart's threat means blocking the passage of thousands of cars and trucks that cross the English Channel to Britain every day.

Bouchart issued this threat after 100 refugees in desperation tried to outrun the police and board a P&O ferry in the port bound for Britain earlier this week. The ferry staff raised the ship's ramps and walkways and turned their fire hoses onto the refugees.

"I could take the decision to block the port...I could bring pressure to bear. It would be illegal but today I want to make a strong gesture towards the British," Bouchart told reporters in Paris after meeting French Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve.

She said she did not discuss her proposal with Cazeneuve, "but I told him that I hoped he would have some strong negotiations with the British." In blocking the port, Bouchart is trying to use the situation to squeeze money out of the British government. She claims that Calais currently pays out 10 million Euros a year in "Security charges" for policing the refugees.

Bouchart's outburst and avowedly illegal threats are part of decades of mounting persecution by European authorities of immigrants trying to travel across Europe to Britain. There are 1,500 or more refugees in Calais and its suburbs trying to reach Britain. Most are fleeing from famine or imperialist wars in their own countries, which include Syria, Afghanistan, Eritrea, and Somalia. They are forced to sleep in the open air with no covers.

Refugee support groups try to help them by distributing food, but the refugees have been reduced to conditions even more brutal than the homeless. Before,

they were able to build shantytowns on unused ground. Now, these dwellings are systematically destroyed.

Until 2002, the refugees were housed in a Red Cross refugee centre in Sangatte, near Calais. The then Interior Minister, Nicolas Sarkozy, shut the camp and forced the refugees to find refuge wherever they could in the Calais area.

This week's incident was used by the British media to further whip up anti-social benefits propaganda in Britain, where the government has for decades imposed massive social austerity programs against the working class. The *Daily Star* said Britain must end its "benefits free-for-all", arguing: "We need to get tough and stop rolling out the red carpet."

The organ of the City, the *Financial Times*, tried to blame "illegal migration" rather than their own austerity policies: "The EU as a bloc has been far too reticent in dealing with the challenge of irregular immigration," it says, pointing out that Germany, Italy, the UK, France and Sweden took in 70 percent of those granted refugee status, while eastern states have been less generous. "What governments need to realize, however, is that illegal migration is not a problem that can be wished away," it adds.

In fact, the desperate situation facing immigrants in Calais testifies to the utterly reactionary character of the anti-immigrant border protection programs such as EU's Frontex. They have produced a situation in which millions of immigrants are trapped and tens of thousands die on the borders of Fortress Europe.

The British government have implemented draconian controls around Britain's coasts, while the stringent border controls of the countries on the European continent have led to untold numbers of deaths by drowning, such as off the Italian island of Lampedusa, near war-torn Libya.

The Socialist Party (PS) government of French Prime Minister Manuel Valls has in particular sought to persecute migrants in order to bolster its law-and-order credentials and make fascistic appeals to the growing voter base of the neo-fascist National Front (FN). While launching deep austerity measures to attack the working class, Valls has advocated that the entire Roma ethnicity should be deported from France.

In Calais, the desperation of the refugees trying to board the ferry comes from the fact that, since the beginning of 2014, then-Interior Minister Manuel Valls placed a full company of the hated CRS paramilitary police permanently in the area around Calais to harass them.

In July of this year, the newly-formed Valls government responded to a request from Bouchart to clear immigrants from the town. The reactionary aims of Bouchart and of Valls are to whip up anti-immigrant sentiment and appeal to the rising voter base of the National Front (FN) in the region by demonizing these refugees.

Valls sent in the police and the CRS, who used pepper spray and tear gas to herd over 500 refugees onto waiting buses and drove them to different detention centers throughout France to be processed as illegal immigrants.

This was the biggest attack on the refugees in Calais this year, but police have been constantly harassing them since. In spite of the harassment, new refugees as well as some of the 500 who were taken elsewhere have returned to the Calais region.



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