

Hunger strike by UK asylum seekers

Barry Mason
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Asylum seekers at the Harmondsworth detention centre, located in south-east England near Heathrow airport, began a hunger strike on March 10. The detention centre, with a capacity of over 600, is the largest in Europe.

The hunger strike began following a protest by detainees against indefinite lock-up—some more than a year—in spite of not having committed any crime. One detainee has been held at the site for over 19 months.

Others are protesting deportation. In the fast track process, under which eight Afghan prisoners face imminent removal, asylum seekers can be deported with as little as two days.

On Saturday a demonstration in support of the hunger strikers was held by protesters outside Harmondsworth. Protesters called for the closure of the site and other similar facilities in the UK.

The hunger strike was reportedly started by detainee Ahmat Obid, who told *RT* he began the protest because authorities were “making fun” of detainees who are being held indefinitely and wanted their cases reviewed.

Harmondsworth is run on behalf of the Home Office, by Mitie Group PLC. For this contract it is paid £180 million by the government.

On March 2 Channel 4 featured conditions in the notorious women-only Yarl’s Wood centre for the deportation of failed asylum seekers. Using undercover filming from within the unit it showed examples of abusive behaviour and contravention of rules by employees of SERCO who run the facility.

This was followed by another exposure on March 4, again using undercover filming, at the Harmondsworth facility. This investigation was carried out over a three-month period.

One detainee is caught on camera exclaiming to his case officer: “I beg you please I don’t want to take my own life...I am tired. I don’t want to die here.”

The coverage includes an employee explaining how the government would not want exposure of the conditions within the centre. He lists the presence of rats, fights amongst detainees, and incidences of self-harm, which have been accelerating.

The footage reveals so-called “efficiency” measures introduced by Mitie in which detainees are locked in their rooms for 12 hours a day rather than 10. A Mitie employee at the facility, speaking on film, said the centre was at breaking point and that conditions for staff have worsened since Mitie took over the contract.

The centre has a history of controversy and has been run by various outsourcing companies. There were major riots at the site in 2004 after an immigrant committed suicide, and further protests in 2006.

In 2009 the US company Geo was awarded the contract. Six detainees died under its control. Mitie assumed the contract in September 2014 along with the nearby Colnbrook detention facility. It has plans to merge the two facilities, creating a combined capacity of over 1,000. *RT* reported that hunger strikers had been able to tweet news about their protest, and that some of those involved had collapsed. There were also tweets from detainees at other detention centres that had also begun hunger strikes. One tweet said 50 detainees at Tinsley House, on the perimeter of Gatwick Airport, were on hunger strike. Another tweet from a detainee at Morton Hall detention centre in Lincolnshire claimed some detainees there were also on hunger strike.

The Home Office denies that the hunger strike had spread to other facilities, but other media outlets, including the *Independent* newspaper, also reported the action spreading beyond Harmondsworth.

A further report on March 13 claimed that the number taking part in the hunger strike at Harmondsworth had grown to around 200 detainees, one of whom had collapsed and had been taken to hospital.

Britain has some of the harshest anti-immigration policies in the world. Harmondsworth is one of 11 immigration removal centres (IRCs) in the UK.

The Home Office estimates that around 30,000 migrants and asylum seekers, nearly one-third of them women and children, are being detained indefinitely in Britain while their immigration status is resolved. They are isolated from the outside world. Only one visitor is allowed. They are confined, without time limit, until their asylum case is heard. If their appeal is rejected they are deported immediately without regard for their safety.

The government also held almost 800 people separately in prisons under immigration legislation in mid-2014.

On March 10 *Independent* stated: “The UK is the only country in the EU with no limit on the length asylum-seekers can be detained. Migrant rights groups [say] that unrest inside the UK’s immigration removal centres had been brewing for some time and called on the Government to end the practice of indefinite detention.”

Most asylum seekers are being forced to flee countries that have been devastated by imperialist war and economic sanctions over the last decades, led by the US and Britain.

The Socialist Equality Party defends the rights of workers to be able to move freely around the world. We condemn and oppose the entire reactionary framework of ‘border controls’ and anti-immigrant legislation, and call for full democratic and citizenship rights for all immigrants, including those classified as “illegal.”



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