

Police attacks on migrants intensify as Calais ferry strike enters fourth week

Dorota Niemitz
22 July 2015

The situation in the French port of Calais is becoming increasingly tense as MyFerryLink sailors' strike enters its fourth week. About 600 sailors are occupying MS Rodin and MS Berlioz, two ferries operating between Calais and Dover, preventing their transfer to DFDS Seaways, which could result in the loss of close to 400 jobs.

In response to the strike, which has led to a blockade of the port and long delays for highway traffic on both sides of the English Channel, British and French authorities are escalating repression both against strikers and migrants trapped in Calais. Thousands of migrants are staying there under appalling conditions, in an open-air camp, as they try to reach Britain from France.

The number of migrants in Calais increased from 2,000 to more than 3,000 since the beginning of this year, with 100 to 150 more arriving each day. Only 700 of migrants were granted asylum in France last year while 1,200 were deported. Most of asylum seekers come from the war-torn areas in Syria, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Afghanistan. Many of them are unaccompanied children.

Last week, British Home Secretary Theresa May announced a proposal to create a secure zone near the ferry terminal and Channel Tunnel entrances able to accommodate up to 230 commercial trucks. This would prevent migrants from approaching and hiding aboard the trucks to gain passage to Britain.

May and French Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve also agreed to allocate a €15 million intervention fund to tighten security around the port and the Eurotunnel. This includes the construction of a 2.5-mile steel barbed wire fence to keep migrants from entering the area.

The UK's Road Haulage Association (RHA) has

called for the military to be deployed to break the ferry strike and to protect truck drivers crossing the Channel from migrants.

"The UK and French governments must acknowledge their responsibilities to all Port of Calais users, move in and act. If this means deployment of the armed forces then so be it," said RHA Chief executive Richard Burnett.

The escalating deployments of riot police and calls to mobilize the army are aimed both at the migrants and the strikers, who have been isolated by unions in France and Britain.

The Maritime Nord union is just suing DFDS, citing technical irregularities, after the British Competition and Market Authority ruled that MyFerryLink's operations breached UK competition rules. DFDS is proposing to keep only 202 of MyFerryLink's 577 workers. The Nord-Pas-de-Calais region, whose economy has collapsed after the closure of coal mines, steel mills, and textile plants, has one of the highest unemployment rates in France: 14 percent, compared with the national average of 10.5 percent.

When workers blocked the port last month to try to force action on their grievances, however, riot police were mobilized to crush the protest.

It was an urgent warning of how the police-state build-up in France against immigrants and ethnic minorities is closely connected to plans for repression against the entire working class. Before attacking the strikers, two of whom were sent to the hospital, the police units had acquired a fearsome reputation attacking migrants. Videos show police violently shove, kick and beat migrants to prevent them from boarding vehicles.

The Calais port is protected by a 16-foot-tall steel fence with razor wire, is equipped with surveillance cameras and is heavily patrolled by the security guards

with dogs who use carbon dioxide detectors to find people breathing inside the vehicles. Gates of the port are guarded by heavily armed French riot police. If an undocumented migrant is found on board, a £2,000 fine per smuggled person is imposed on a truck driver.

The frantic attempts to leave France are a result of the dire conditions at the Calais migrant camp as well as frequent assaults on refugees by the riot police, which on several occasions have dismantled the nearby refugee camp chasing migrants off its grounds.

Migrants are forced to live in the 40-acre stretch of neglected shanty town slum three miles north of Calais called the New Jungle. Forced to camp in tents and self-made huts without running water or electricity, migrants receive only one meal a day, often queuing for it for many hours. Some report going hungry for days.

Without adequate food, blankets and shelter, disease and anger are spreading among camp residents. UN officials have described the New Jungle as an “intolerable humanitarian scandal.” Diseases such as scabies, diarrhea and stomach bugs are already present.

The Calais Migrant Solidarity group reported that four people have died trying to cross the border into the UK since the begin of June. An Eritrean refugee died last week in an attempt to board a train and three others have been injured after breaking into the tunnel terminal. Many risk their lives trying to cut through the metal fences to jump aboard of the trains moving at 90 miles per hour.

In the last three weeks alone, French authorities intercepted over 8,000 migrant attempts to enter England.

The escalating security deployment is taking place under ever more heated political relations between France and England. As the protest of the French sailors is estimated to cost Great Britain about £250 million a day, it stoked reactionary mutual accusations between French and British officials.

French officials including former employment minister Xavier Bertrand are blaming Britain for making itself attractive to the migrants by not cracking down on its undocumented labor market. British Prime Minister David Cameron is using the situation to impose even more draconian anti-immigration policies.

“We have to break the link between getting on the boat and getting settlement in Europe, (...) we have to make sure that England is less easy for migrants to

come to and work in and that’s what our immigration bill is all about.” he said.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact