Cameron’s attack on migrants spearheads appeal to far right in the UK

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UK Prime Minister David Cameron’s attack on refugees in Calais and Dunkirk, France as a “bunch of migrants” during Prime Minister’s Question Time in parliament Wednesday was deliberately inflammatory.

Some 9,000 people—most fleeing wars and instability instigated and fanned by British imperialism in their home countries-are currently trapped in the French ports. Refused entry to France and Britain, many live in make-shift shanty towns, eking out an existence on “charitable” handouts, or trying to make often life-claiming attempts to cross the Channel to the UK.

In the furore that followed Cameron’s comment, many pointed to the fact that it was made on January 27, Holocaust Memorial Day, as if it were an unfortunate coincidence. It is nothing of the sort.

Just as in the 1930s, capitalism in crisis threatens to drag humanity into a new and even greater catastrophe, poisoning the atmosphere with nationalist and racist filth in order to legitimise the turn to war and dictatorship.

Cameron’s remark must be placed in the context of the demand of European governments for the sealing of borders with armed guards, and the resort to other police-state measures. Only last week, under the banner of clamping down on migration and tackling “extremism”, Cameron announced that he intended to introduce a “language test” for all migrants and said that Muslim women should be forced to remove face veils, like hijabs and niqabs, when asked by public officials.

Cameron presented this as less draconian than the blanket ban enforced in France, but this week the chief inspector of schools announced that schools could be marked as “inadequate” if they allow staff or pupils to wear veils in the classroom. This induces head teachers to implement a ban, lest their school be penalised and placed in special measures.

As for Cameron’s reference to the Calais migrants, he is known to prepare carefully with a team of advisers for Prime Minister’s Question Time every Wednesday at midday, with his responses scripted to achieve the maximum effect.

All of which makes the full content of his response politically revealing.

Cameron was answering a question from Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn on the tax settlement reached by Her Majesty’s Revenues and Customs (HMRC) with Google. Seven years after HMRC began investigating its complex tax arrangements, the internet giant has agreed to pay a paltry £130 million on years of back taxes.

At the equivalent of a 3 percent tax rate, the deal has been condemned by other European governments who regard it as proof that the UK is setting itself up as a tax haven.

More fundamentally, the arrangement has caused public anger after seven years of government-mandated austerity that includes savage cuts in vital social and welfare provision. On the same day as Cameron’s questioning, a legal challenge in the High Court to the “bedroom tax”--the withdrawal of housing benefit for those deemed to have “too many” bedrooms--exposed how people face losing their homes as a consequence.

In parliament, Corbyn cited a question from “Geoff, a working man over the age of 30” who wanted to ask the prime minister if “there is a scheme that I can join that has the same rate of tax as Google?”

Criticising HMRC for failing to get a better deal, Corbyn went on, “Many people will say this: ‘Why is there one rule for big multinational companies and another for ordinary self-employed people and small businesses’?”

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Refusing to answer the question, Cameron retorted instead, pointing at Corbyn and Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, that the "idea that those two right honourable gentlemen would stand up to anyone in this regard is laughable. Look at their record over the last week.

"They met with the unions and gave them flying pickets. They met with the Argentineans, they gave them the Falkland Islands. They met with a bunch of migrants in Calais, they said they could all come to Britain. The only people they never stand up for are the British people and hardworking taxpayers."

Cameron's answer makes plain that anti-immigrant propaganda is an integral part of his government's defence of corporate interests based on austerity and militarism. In bringing together in one attack the "hot button" issues of the far right, he underscored that these interests are inseparably bound to the mobilisation of the most reactionary social layers. And, in raising the spectre of "flying pickets", last seen in Britain in the 1984-85 miners' strike, he exposed the secret fear of the bourgeoisie--an insurrectionary movement of the working class.

All of which makes Labour's mealy-mouthed protestations over the prime minister's remarks even more pathetic.

Yvette Cooper, who leads Labour's taskforce on refugees, complained that Cameron's lack of "statesmanship like language" risked undermining "cross party consensus on such a sensitive issue."

This consensus only exists because, outside of rhetoric, little separates Labour's policy on migration from that of the Tories. The policy of Labour, the Liberal Democrats and organisations such as Save the Children, is to pressure Cameron to allow just 3,000 unaccompanied children to be admitted to the UK.

In fact, visiting the French camps at the weekend, Corbyn pointedly refused to put a figure on the number of refugees he believed should be admitted to the UK. While arguing for politicians "to be a bit more human," he said only that Britain should do more to process the asylum claims of those with a British family connection.

Corbyn's actual statement on "flying pickets" is also a fudge. Cameron was referring to the Labour leader's remark that he would repeal aspects of the anti-trade union legislation first introduced under the Conservative-administration of Margaret Thatcher should Labour win office. Corbyn said that "sympathy" strike action should be allowed, while stating that a Labour government would leave "closed shop" laws—where every worker must be a union member—in place. Asked if he would support the use of flying pickets as a part of this sympathy action, Corbyn avoided answering directly, implying that the issue was irrelevant as "the number of strikes [is] actually very small."

Pressed on whether he would support other workers in the National Health Service joining the junior doctor's strike—currently suspended—the Labour leader again refused to be drawn.

As for the Malvinas/Falkland Islands, which Thatcher went to war over in 1982, Corbyn has merely called for "dialogue" with Argentina over their fate--suggesting a "Northern Ireland-style power-sharing deal" that would supposedly accommodate the interests of all sides.

Such pronouncements make clear the dangers posed to working people by the claim—promoted by the pseudo-left—that Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party provides a means of defending workers' interests.

While the bourgeoisie determinedly marshals its resources, Corbyn—in the rotten time-honoured tradition of the Labour "left"—acts to demobilise workers and youth by concealing the real state of class tensions beneath soothing homilies of how everything can be resolved peacefully and to the satisfaction of all if only notions of "human decency" and wiser heads can prevail.

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