

# UK steps up repression of migrant workers

Alice Summers  
20 September 2016

At least 35 migrant workers were arrested at the start of July in a series of immigration raids across 15 restaurants of the Byron Hamburgers chain in London.

A statement from the Home Office confirmed the arrests of the 35 workers, although witnesses of the event interviewed in the Spanish language *El Ibérico* estimated the figure at closer to 50, with another 150 managing to avoid the raids and who are now allegedly in hiding.

The workers, mostly of Brazilian, Albanian, Nepalese or Egyptian origin, were arrested after being called into work by their manager, under the pretext of having to take part in mandatory training activities. However, according to witnesses, within minutes of their arrival immigration officers appeared at the restaurants and proceeded to read out the names of workers who they then arrested and interrogated.

Although the government has even now not confirmed the fate of all the arrested migrants, a chef at one of the Byron restaurants interviewed by the *Guardian* stated that “around 20” were taken straight to an immigration holding centre after the raids and 25 workers are known to have already been deported.

The ambush met with protests from many workers and youth across the capital. At the beginning of August, the Holborn branch of the restaurant chain was forced to temporarily close after around 200 people protested outside the building, carrying placards and banners denouncing the company. Protesters have also called for the boycott of the chain, and two branches were forced to temporarily close after protesters released hundreds of live insects into the restaurants. According to *El Ibérico*, many Byron workers staged a strike on the day of the raids out of solidarity with their work colleagues who were affected.

Despite denying that the supposed training activities were a set-up, Byron confirmed that it facilitated the raids, with a Home Office spokesperson declaring that

the raids were “intelligence-led” and conducted with “the full co-operation of the business.” As a result, the burger chain will not face any prosecution for illegal employment practices, the Home Office confirmed.

In the interview with *El Ibérico*, one worker at Byron who witnessed the event explained that the company undoubtedly knew the migration status of the workers. They described the exploitative conditions that they therefore faced, as management knew that their employees could do little to protest their conditions without risking being reported to the authorities: “The bosses know the situation of these people. We work hard and we don’t say anything. If we have to do 60 hours a week, well we shut up and we do it. The people at the top of the company know this and so they hire these people.”

Expressing the precarious situation faced by many undocumented migrant workers across the country, the worker described how migrant workers lived in constant fear of raids by immigration officers, both at work and at home, and stated, “In the street and at home we always run the risk of them catching us.”

This incident is far from unique. Since the raids of Byron restaurants in July, tens or even hundreds of migrant workers have been detained in immigration raids across the country, including the arrest of two Indian men at a construction site in Liverpool in August, as well as the September arrests of four Bangladeshi workers in Wales, and of another two workers, also of Bangladeshi origin, at an Indian restaurant in Scotland. Six of these eight workers are now being held at immigration detention centres awaiting deportation.

According to data released in a Freedom of Information request in July 2016, immigration raids have increased by 80 percent over the last five years. In the capital alone, there were 19,853 immigration raids from 2010 to 2015, almost 11 a day.

The number of raids in London peaked in 2014, at 4,703 across the year, up from 2,531 in 2010. The figures dropped slightly in 2015, although there were still 4,573 raids. If information and intelligence gathering expeditions are also included in the figures—in addition to raids to arrest and detain migrants—the number of “visits” in London rockets up to 12,026 in 2014, or approximately 33 per day.

The areas worst affected by these repressive immigration raids were the London postal codes E15 (1,396), E6 (776), E7 (637), SE1 (554) and SE18 (540). These correspond to the boroughs of Newham, Southwark and Greenwich, whose Labour Party-dominated local councils have been determined to step up their vicious attacks on migrant workers.

In 2013, Newham Borough Council became the first local authority in Britain to introduce a mandatory licensing scheme for private landlords renting out properties. Although this legal measure is nominally intended to prosecute rogue landlords who let out substandard properties, the people most affected are often migrant workers living in these properties.

Last November, Newham Council’s housing enforcement team raided a property suspected of being overcrowded, leading to the arrest of two Bangladeshi migrants on suspicion of immigration offences. The property, which hosted five adults and two children, broke health and safety regulations about space and had evidence of bedbugs in the bedrooms.

In July, in the London Borough of Brent, housing enforcement officers discovered 17 people living in a three-bedroom terraced house with no hot water or heating. According to Brent Council’s Private Housing Services, “[O]fficers from Immigration Enforcement were also present to investigate the immigration status of the tenants as legally required.”

In March, in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham, police and immigration officers found 70 people living in four severely overcrowded properties. Although figures are not available to assess how often immigration officers are present at housing raids, a Freedom of Information request by the Institute of Race Relations revealed that “in 12 of the 20 local authorities that provided data, on at least some visits tenants would have had to answer to the police and/or UKBA [The UK Border Agency].”

Landlords are able to terminate a tenancy agreement

when their tenants’ right to remain in the UK finishes, and they are also encouraged to check the immigration status of potential tenants before offering them a tenancy agreement.

Conservative Party MP Kris Hopkins stated, “No one should be profiting from illegal immigration, and that includes landlords . ” In reality, rather than being intended to crack down on landlords who “profit” from illegal migration, housing raids are primarily a repressive measure targeted at poor and ethnic minority communities and aimed at clamping down on the migrants themselves.

Unannounced raids are largely ineffective as a tactic to combat bad conditions for which landlords are responsible, as it is unusual for landlords to spend much time in the properties they rent out. If the reason for the raids really were to protect tenants from slum conditions and overcrowding, there would be little reason to conduct surprise visits, as tenants would be unlikely to hide their real living conditions.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**