

British press witch-hunt refugee children from Calais

Robert Stevens
20 October 2016

The British media and right-wing politicians have unleashed a filthy campaign against juvenile refugees and asylum seekers that have been granted permission to enter the UK.

Since the beginning of the week, two small groups of unaccompanied children have arrived in the UK from the Calais “Jungle” in northern France. The camp, “home” to up to 10,000 people, is set to be demolished by the French authorities.

The children are entitled to move to the UK from France under existing European Union asylum law, due to their having family ties to relatives already in the UK, but have been prevented from doing so up until now by the Conservative government.

After fleeing the war zones of Syria and Afghanistan and then suffering months of degradation and humiliation at the hands of the French authorities, the children arrived at an immigration centre in Croydon, south London. They faced the humiliation of a crowd of press reporters who stuck cameras in their faces and took photos in order to demonise them in Wednesday morning’s newspaper editions and online.

A howl of collective outrage demanded that they should be barred from entering the UK because, they claimed, some were really adults. The *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, and *The Sun* all front-paged the story with provocative banner headlines. *The Sun* published a photo of one of the refugees alongside a strapline reading, “Migrant ‘children’ look 40”. One had “crows feet” on his face, it claimed. The *Mail* reported that one of the refugees was “rated by a facial recognition program as having the features of a 38-year-old.” The *Times*, the *Sun*’s sister paper owned by billionaire oligarch Rupert Murdoch, headlined its article “Migrants’ scam”.

Each repulsive story had the words *children* and

minors in quotation marks.

Conservative MP, Ranil Jayawardena, who sits on the Home Affairs Select Committee, told *The Sun*, “I think the British public will be very surprised to see that, instead of primary school-aged children arriving, we are finding young men, perhaps even adults, coming across our border.”

The *Sun*’s main banner headline was “Tell us the tooth”—a reference to the calls by a number of MPs to establish the age of the children by forcing them to undergo dental tests. Such an act would be illegal, as any such checks on a child require parental consent. Leading the calls was Conservative MP David Davies. Davies tweeted, “These young men don’t look like minors to me. They are hulking teenagers who look older than 18... We should invite anyone who wants to come to the UK to take dental tests.”

The British Dental Association stated, “We are vigorously opposed to the use of dental X-rays to determine whether asylum seekers have reached 18.”

Ruth Allen, the Association’s chief executive, said, “We are talking about young people, children, of course adults as well, who have often been through incredible amounts of trauma, torture and abuse. Intrusive medical tests are not necessarily going to be at all appropriate and would be considered to be very intrusive and would be retraumatising.”

In his comments, Davies piously declared, “I hope British hospitality is not being abused.”

What sickening hypocrisy! There has been no “hospitality” offered by the government to those suffering in Calais, or anywhere else. A grand total of just 14 children arrived in Croydon from Calais Tuesday. A further 14 arrived on Wednesday. At most around 200 children from Calais will be accepted into the UK. The Tory government has only accepted, very

reluctantly, a tiny number of people who have fled homelands decimated as a result of wars in which British imperialism has played a central role.

More than a year after former Prime Minister David Cameron promised to settle a paltry 20,000 Syrian refugees by 2020, only 2,800 have arrived in Britain. This is just over half the rate of 4,000 a year needed to meet the commitment, under conditions where there are more than 4.8 million refugees from the war-torn country.

Those trapped in Calais face a perilous existence and many have perished trying to escape. This week, a man described as an “illegal immigrant” by the *Daily Mirror* was found suffocated, covered head to toe in plastic film under the weight of baby clothes catalogues in a HGV truck. The corpse was discovered when the truck arrived in England after passing through Calais. Last week an Eritrean died and his wife was injured in an accident involving a British driver on a motorway near Calais. He was the fourteenth person to lose his life in the Calais area this year. In September, a teenage Afghan boy was killed while trying to climb on to a lorry heading to the Channel Tunnel.

Whipping up anti-immigrant hysteria has been a staple of the right-wing media in Britain for more than two decades. It is integral to the justification of British imperialism’s predatory wars, legitimising the assault on democratic rights under the umbrella of the “war on terror” and in providing a scapegoat for the imposition brutal cuts to vital social services. However, the filth now being slung at the young refugees and asylum seekers also has an immediate political aim. During the referendum campaign leading to the narrow June 23 vote to leave the EU, xenophobic anti-immigrant sentiment united both the Leave and Remain camps. For Remain, Cameron promised to secure agreement with the EU to ensure Fortress Europe would keep out migrants, while the Leave campaign made its central appeal to “take back control of our borders.”

As parliament returned after the summer recess, Prime Minister Theresa May, who campaigned for Remain but is now pledged to a “hard Brexit”, declared that her government would insist on tighter immigration controls in any negotiations with the EU. Davies is a hardline Eurosceptic and supporter of the extreme right Freedom Association.

Any opposition to the depiction of asylum seekers as

a threat is treated as heresy. Just prior to the arrival of the children from Calais, the pop singer Lily Allen visited the Jungle camp and was visibly distraught at what she witnessed. Allen was filmed by the BBC speaking to a 13-year-old boy who had been in the camp for two months. Moved to tears, she told the boy, after he had related his traumatised recent past to her, “It just seems that, at three different intervals in this young boy’s life, the English in particular have put you in danger. We’ve bombed your country, put you in the hands of the Taliban and now put you in danger of risking your life to get into our country. I apologise on behalf of my country. I’m sorry for what we have put you through.”

For this truthful statement, Allen was pilloried. Colonel Richard Kemp, a British commander in Afghanistan in 2003, joined in, stating, “What is she doing there? She clearly does not have any understanding of the situation.”

Responding to the onslaught against her, Allen said the attacks were “being used to support the xenophobic rhetoric and narrative that we are currently experiencing, especially in the mainstream press.”

On Wednesday, speaking to Radio 4, Davies declared, “We must not be naive about this. It’s no good Lily Allen turning up with tears in her eyes and all the rest of it—we need to be quite hard-nosed here.”

With the news that the boy Allen spoke to was one of those who arrived in the UK on Wednesday, *The Sun* made a point of stating that he “claimed to be 13 but looked far older...”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact