

“We will not eat until we are free”

UK: Hunger strikers at Yarl’s Wood immigration detention centre

Laura Tiernan
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Around 120 detainees at Yarl’s Wood immigration detention centre in Bedfordshire, England are entering the fourth day of a hunger strike, protesting “inhumane” conditions at one of Europe’s largest detention facilities.

The mainly women detainees are demanding an end to indefinite detention, describing “systematic torture” by the Home Office and the private security firm, Serco.

In a statement posted yesterday evening on Twitter, the detainees announced, “After an initial three-day hunger strike where the Home Office refused to acknowledge the hunger strike, it is clear that they are not listening to us. On Monday 26/02/18, we will cease to participate in detention, we will not eat, use their facilities or work for them.”

The hunger strikers launched their action with a handwritten statement last Wednesday, condemning the Home Office for “offensive practices” including violation of habeas corpus.

“The majority of detainees are not detained by a judge,” they wrote. Instead, detainees were presumed guilty and deprived of liberty “by a person” (Serco, which runs the facility), whose “vocational success” is based on “how many people they remove”—a situation they described as an “obvious conflict [and] morally bankrupt.”

Indefinite detention, they wrote, amounted to a form of torture: “At any point an officer could turn up and take your room-mate; you’re constantly on edge, not knowing what will happen next.”

“The UK is the only country in the EU European Union with no time limit on detention,” they noted.

Under Rule 35, an amendment to the Detention

Centre Rules 2001, introduced in September 2016, vulnerable adults, including victims of torture, should not be detained, or only as a last resort. But Rule 35 is consistently flouted. “Victims of torture, human trafficking, modern slavery, asylum seekers and sick and disabled people continue to be detained,” they wrote.

On Thursday, detainees issued a list of 15 demands, including right of access to a bail hearing within three to five days (a legal right); the ending of indefinite detention and re-detention; no detention of people who came to the UK as children; and an amnesty for those who have lived in the UK for 10 years or longer.

Many of the Yarl’s Wood detainees have British husbands and children they are prevented from seeing, a situation that infringes their Article 8 rights under the European Convention on Human Rights, the detainees explained, including their right to a “private and family life.”

Detainees condemned slave labour in detention, whereby they are forced into menial work for £1 per hour and have called for an end to forced removal by flights from Britain: “We want an end to charter flights and the snatching of people from their beds in the night and herding them like animals.”

On Friday, Labour’s Shadow Home Secretary Dianne Abbott met with a group of about 30 detainees at Yarl’s Wood, along with shadow attorney general and former human rights lawyer, Shami Chakrabarti. The group included a Nigerian woman who had lived in the UK for 30 years, has five British children, and has been detained for seven months, according to the *Guardian*. Another woman had been detained for nine months.

“These women were clearly desperate. Indefinite

detention, with no release date, is just wrong,” Abbott told journalists. “Many of them are released to the community after spending time at Yarl’s Wood, so why do they need to be in detention?”

Abbott is reported to have responded emotionally to the plight of detainees, but this was political theatrics.

The Labour Party has played a central role in erecting the current punitive regime against immigrant detainees. Yarl’s Wood was opened by the Labour government in September 2001, with control handed to private security contractor, Group 4 Falck. It was one of a number of facilities seen as rich pickings by private contractors who swooped in on lucrative contracts offered up by the Labour government of Tony Blair. Group 4 Falck was replaced by Global Services Limited (GSL) in 2004, and by Serco in 2007. G4S, the world’s largest security company, with a declared net annual income of £220 million, presently delivers “healthcare services” at Yarl’s Wood.

Abbott and Chakrabarti were silent on the real history of Yarl’s Wood, where repeated hunger strikes have taken place over the past 17 years, most of these, again, under Labour.

The first hunger strike by 25 Roma detainees occurred just weeks after the facility opened and another, by ethnic Albanian Gjevat Cerkini, began in December 2001. In July 2005, 30 Ugandan women launched a hunger strike protesting cruel treatment by staff and inadequate healthcare, followed by a hunger strike of 100 women just two years later. In February 2010, a hunger strike against indefinite detention saw around 70 women protestors “locked in an airless corridor without water or toilet facilities,” according to a report at the time by the *Guardian*.

Beyond Labour’s complicity in the conditions faced by detainees at Yarl’s Wood is the broader anti-immigrant chauvinism the party has helped stoke. During the 2015 general election, Labour pledged to “control immigration,” echoing the campaigns of both the Conservatives and UK Independence Party. The party even issued a red campaign mug, emblazoned with the slogan, “Controls on Immigration. I’m voting Labour.”

The Brexit referendum the following year saw both the Leave and Remain camps promote anti-immigrant measures, with Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn making an explicit connection between uncontrolled

immigration and the lowering of wages, echoing the nationalist campaigns led by the trade unions.

Labour’s current manifesto (*For the Many Not the Few*) calls for a “fair” immigration system, “which is based on our economic needs, balancing controls and existing entitlements.” It states, “We will take decisive actions to end the exploitation of migrant labour undercutting workers’ pay and conditions.”

The manifesto makes no call for the closure of Yarl’s Wood and other immigrant detention centres where men women and children are incarcerated for the sole “crime” of having been born in another country.

Yarl’s Wood is part of a broader system of incarceration of immigrants in the UK. According to the Inspector of Prisons, in the year ending December 2016, 28,908 people entered immigration detention. At any time, more than 3,500 people are in immigration detention in the UK. They are held mainly in one of the nine Immigration Removal Centres, three Short Term Holding Facilities or in prisons. On October 3, 2016, prisons held 442 people detained under immigration powers.

There are currently 60 million refugees worldwide—victims of the endless wars and devastation inflicted by the United States, Britain and other imperialist powers on the peoples of the Middle East and Africa. The anti-immigrant measures promoted by governments throughout Europe and the US are aimed at dividing the working class.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for the immediate closure of all immigration detention centres and upholds the right of all workers and young people to live in the country of their choice, with full citizenship rights and access to welfare, housing, healthcare and education.



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