

Hundreds of asylum seekers face imminent eviction in Glasgow

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UK-based outsourcing multinational Serco has initiated plans to evict and change the locks at the residences of 330 asylum seekers in Glasgow, as part of its callously named “Move On” programme.

The firm is contracted by the UK Home Office to run “asylum dispersal” in Scotland alongside other areas of the country. It addressed a letter to Glasgow City Council and local charities last Friday detailing plans to terminate housing services for “former Asylum Seekers who do not wish to engage in voluntary return, and who the Home Office have determined have no legal right to remain in the UK.”

Serco claims that it has incurred unsustainable losses on the asylum dispersal contract tendered by the Conservative government in 2012—worth hundreds of millions of pounds each year—because of a surge in applications and growing numbers of what it terms “overstayers” who remain in the UK after being rejected for residency status.

This is primarily a result of the expedited application procedure, which was brought in as part of the government’s “hostile environment” immigration strategy, personally overseen by Prime Minister Theresa May in her previous role as home secretary.

Serco, which has a long record of holding refugees in dilapidated, vermin-infested housing as well as abusive, prison-like detention facilities, is now threatening hundreds of refugees with homelessness. This is in a bid to encourage the May government to escalate its policy of “deport first, appeal later” and to extract higher fees as asylum contracts come up for renewal next year.

Company officials say that they receive no Home Office funding for those who receive a “negative asylum decision” and that “Serco is now consistently accommodating approximately 250–300 former asylum

seekers ... at our own expense.”

“For such cases,” they complain, “There is effectively no next step in terms of their move on from Serco accommodation aside from engaging with UKVI [UK Visas and Immigration] under the voluntary returns programme.”

In the Orwellian language of UK immigration policy, “voluntary returns” is a category of “enforced removal” or deportation.

According to the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford, the number of people deported or pressured to leave the UK annually under various “voluntary” return programs has ballooned from approximately 3,500 in 2004 to nearly 30,000 in 2016.

Serco has already issued six initial “lock change notices,” giving asylum seekers just seven days to vacate its property. It plans to evict roughly 10 households per week for the foreseeable future.

Those threatened with eviction include lone individuals as well as families with young children. The majority have fled social collapse and persecution in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, caused by ongoing imperialist wars and intrigues in which the British ruling elite plays a central role.

According to the Glasgow *Herald*, approximately 100 of those issued “lock change” notices have already been granted leave to remain in the UK but will be turned out onto the street regardless. The remainder are navigating the notoriously complex and difficult process of gathering evidence to appeal Home Office judgements on their residency status.

Charities have warned of a looming “humanitarian crisis” in the city, as the resources of refugee and homelessness charities are already “dangerously low” and ill-equipped to deal with hundreds of asylum seekers being forced onto the streets at once.

Zoe Halliday, coordinator of the Refugee Survival Trust, told STV News: “We have seen applications to our emergency destitution grants programme reach an all-time high over the past year, with no signs of abating ... there is a very real possibility that funds will run out in the near future.”

“It does not bear thinking about what compromising situations these individuals and families may be forced into, without this important safety net,” Halliday said.

Robina Qureshi, the director of Positive Action in Housing, issued a searing rebuke to Serco and its “multimillionaire aristocrat” CEO, Rupert Soames, in a statement condemning the firm for turning “war refugees and their children out on to the streets because they no longer turn a tidy profit.”

Qureshi continued: “Today’s refused asylum seeker could be granted leave to remain tomorrow. Only three weeks ago, a Glasgow hunger strike family from Iraq who had waited 18 years for a decision were handed status within hours of the Home Office getting wind of the potential public embarrassment.

“Serco has no right to pass comment on the legal status of its residents. It is a landlord not an immigration officer. Many residents have developed severe mental health problems, are self-harming or are close to the brink of suicide.”

In a separate comment, Qureshi told the press: “It is a chilling reminder of the triple suicide of an asylum-seeking couple and their son at Glasgow’s Red Road flats in 2010, on the day they were told they had to get out of their Home Office flat.”

Serco’s plans have met with broad public opposition. A rally organised at short notice on Tuesday at the steps of the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall on Buchanan Street attracted around 300 protestors. Many carried homemade banners and placards with messages of solidarity, such as “Hospitality Not Hostility,” “Change The System Not The Locks,” and “Refugees Welcome.”

Two Afghan refugees, Mirwais Ahmadzai, 27, and Rahman Shah, 32, began a hunger strike outside the Brand Street headquarters of the Home Office on Wednesday to protest the length of time it has taken to process their paperwork. A further protest is planned for Brand Street on Saturday, August 4 at 11 a.m.

While feigning solidarity with refugees, the devolved Scottish National Party (SNP) government, together

with the Scottish Labour Party and the Scottish Greens, are leading efforts to contain and channel opposition behind bankrupt appeals for Conservative Home Secretary Sajid Javid to intervene to halt Serco’s eviction plans.

None of the major parties, whether at the local, regional or national level, have any principled differences over the persecution of asylum seekers. They each share responsibility with the May government for the imperialist wars and pro-big business policies that have ravaged one country after another in Eastern Europe, North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia—causing the most severe global refugee crisis since the Second World War.

A letter of protest addressed to Javid by Susan Aitken, the SNP leader of Glasgow City Council, signed by several SNP, Labour and Green councillors and members of Parliament, merely warns that the eviction “is far less likely to lead to their [the asylum seekers] voluntarily leaving the UK than it is to their joining the city’s homeless and rough sleeper populations.”

While Glasgow City Council claims it was “blindsided” by Serco and calls instead for “a fair, appropriate and measured way” to deal with asylum seekers, officials at the company have insisted that the “lock change” policy emerged out of a protracted consultation with Glasgow City Council.

According to Serco, the consultation was dedicated to the development of a new “pathway/protocol” to “eliminate or drastically reduce the rates of over staying of former asylum households who should no longer be residing within the asylum system.”



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