

Trial of “Stansted 15” anti-deportation protesters begins in UK

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10 October 2018

The trial opened in Chelmsford, Essex on October 1 of 15 anti-deportation activists accused of terrorism offences for preventing the departure of an immigration removal charter flight from London Stansted Airport.

The Socialist Equality Party demands the immediate release of the Stansted 15 and the dropping of all charges against them.

A hundred supporters of the “Stansted 15” gathered outside Chelmsford Crown Court displaying banners reading, “Stand up for human rights defenders” and “Drop the charges.” Appealing for international unity, the crowd sang, “Break ’em all down, break ’em all down, these walls between us.”

The activists, belonging to campaign group “End Deportations,” had locked themselves around a government-chartered Boeing 767 on the night of March 28, 2017, to prevent take-off. Aboard were 57 undocumented migrants from detention centres awaiting forced removal to Nigeria, Ghana and Sierra Leone.

Before the arrival of the police, the campaigners were able to display banners proclaiming “mass deportations kill” and “no one is illegal.”

The airport runway was closed for an hour and 20 minutes, during which time 19 flights were diverted. It took a removal team until 8 a.m. to extricate the protesters one by one from the body of the plane.

This is the first such action against enforced deportations in the UK. The activists said the action enabled 37 of the 57 detainees on board the chance to continue their asylum claims.

Charged under the 1990 Aviation and Maritime Security Act for endangering safety at an aerodrome, the defendants face potential life sentences for their courageous, non-violent protest. The defendants, aged 27 to 44, all entered pleas of not guilty, maintaining the chartered flight was illegal because the migrants had not exhausted their applications to remain in the UK.

The charge of endangering the safety of an aerodrome is very rarely used and one that needs approval at the highest levels of the state, by the attorney general. Speaking for the prosecution, Tony Badnoch QC laid out the gravity of the charges. He said that at the time of the protest “the UK threat level in relation to international terrorism was classed as ‘severe.’ This meant an attack was considered ‘highly likely.’ In order to deal with the incursion, a number of armed officers already at Stansted had to ‘down arms,’ thus reducing the capacity of the police to carry out their duties at the terminal building.” He accused protesters of putting the safety of the airport and passengers at risk.

Such hypocrisy belies the real risk facing tens of thousands of migrants fleeing war and impoverishment, due to European Union and International Monetary Fund austerity policies and illegal military interventions by the Western powers, including Britain.

According to Corporate Watch, every month “ghost flights” take off from the UK, forcibly removing migrants seeking asylum, hidden from public view and beyond the bounds of freedom of information requests. This has been going on for years. It notes that in July 2013 “the Home Office set up a central unit called the “National Removals Command within the Immigration Enforcement division ... in charge of arranging detention and deportation of “illegals,” as well as running the “Assisted Voluntary Return scheme.”

Amnesty International UK is sending observers to the trial of the Stansted 15, which is expected to last six to eight weeks. They are concerned that such a serious charge has been brought as a deterrent to other activists taking similar nonviolent direct action in defence of human rights.

Expressing concern about the flagrant attack on democratic rights, a letter was published in the *Guardian* in March demanding all charges against the Stansted 15

be dropped and that the Home Office cease chartering flights for deportation.

The letter was signed by 50 representatives from the UK arts and media industry, including film director Ken Loach, screenwriter Jimmy McGovern, and musician Lowkey. A number of actors—Emma Thompson, Maxine Peake and Sue Johnston—signed, as did novelist Philip Pulman.

The letter declared, “Secret deportation flights take thousands of people from our communities every year. Parents, friends and neighbours are targeted on the basis of their perceived nationality and snatched to fill a flight that the Home Office has chartered. ... Violence and abuse from security contractors have been documented on these flights. Most people would be horrified if they were aware of the nature of this process.”

Out of 257 Labour Party Members of Parliament, only four signed.

Successive British governments, both Labour and Conservative, have a filthy record regarding immigration. The recent Windrush scandal, which prompted the resignation of Home Secretary Amber Rudd for lying about the Home Office deportation targets, highlighted the illegal deportation of hundreds, maybe thousands of immigrants. Arriving in the UK as children with their parents from the Commonwealth in the 1960s and 1970s, they found themselves without the proof of their right to remain required by recent changes in legislation.

The 1971 Immigration Act granted leave to remain for post-war Commonwealth immigrants but did not issue them any paperwork or keep records. However, legislation passed in 2012 demanded proof of residency to obtain healthcare, open a bank account, get a job, rent a home, claim benefits and ultimately stay in the UK—a bureaucratic nightmare.

Last month, Sarah O’Connor, a prominent campaigner and victim of the Windrush scandal, died in debt and facing homelessness. Sarah came to the UK aged six and as an adult worked continuously, at Ford in Dagenham and in retail, paying taxes and national insurance contributions, until she was declared an illegal immigrant.

Despite addressing Parliament as to the plight of the Windrush generation, and even going through naturalisation to be recognized as a British citizen, O’Connor faced insurmountable problems not of her making that remained unresolved at the time of her death.

In anticipation of the UK leaving the European Union next year, Home Secretary Sajid Javid announced at the Conservative party conference that a new white paper

would come out in the autumn. Ahead of a new immigration bill, the paper will outline proposals allowing the government to prioritise highly skilled over low-skilled migrants from EU and non-EU countries.

As with the Conservatives, the Labour Party, Liberal Democrats and the Greens all support immigration controls. A similar idea to Javid’s has already been aired by Labour. Jeremy Corbyn’s shadow Brexit secretary Sir Keir Starmer argued for a two-tier migration system in the EU, which divides migrants into highly skilled and low- and semi-skilled workers who should be “restricted by sector-based quotas, negotiated between government, industry and trade unions.” Corbyn’s position is that freedom of movement is “not a principle” and that in relation to immigration, “Labour will do what is best for the economy” and advances a policy of “managed migration.”

While Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott declared she was “deeply concerned by the misuse of terror laws and the brutality of charter flights,” exposed by the Stansted 15 cases, she made clear that the profit interests of business will dictate immigration policy. “We have economic needs that dictate we need migrants, to help tackle skills and labour shortages,” she said. This was a marker that a Corbyn-led government will offer no haven for asylum seekers and refugees.

Workers and youth took to the streets in the US recently to demand the end to the cruel separation of children from refugee parents—a practice that continues today in the US and has been going on in the UK for years.

In our *Statement of Principles*, the Socialist Equality Party explains that “we stand for the right of workers of every country to live and work where they choose. We condemn and oppose the reactionary framework of “border controls” and anti-immigrant legislation and call for the full democratic and citizenship rights of all immigrants, including those classified as illegal.”



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