

UK: “Stansted 15” anti-deportation protesters found guilty of terrorism charges

Margot Miller
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Fifteen UK anti-deportation activists, accused of terrorism offences for preventing the departure of an immigration removal charter flight from London Stansted Airport, have been found guilty.

Following a nine-week trial at Chelmsford Crown Court, the jury found the “Stansted 15” in contravention of the rarely used 1990 Aviation and Maritime Security Act, by endangering safety at an airport. The defendants, who are preparing to appeal the verdict, face potential life prison sentences and await sentencing in February.

This is a blatant act of class justice aimed at severely curtailing the democratic right to protest. Over 1,300 people protested outside the Home Office in London following the perverse judgement.

On the night of March 28, 2017, the activists, belonging to the campaign group “End Deportations,” breached the perimeter fence at Stansted airport, locked themselves around a government-chartered Boeing 767, and prevented take-off. On board were 57 undocumented migrants from detention centres awaiting forced removal to Nigeria, Ghana and Sierra Leone. To return the migrants, some of whom faced torture or death, would have been a flagrant denial of their human rights.

Before the police arrived, the campaigners were able to proclaim on banners their message that “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 10 hours to extricate the protesters one by one from the body of the plane.

Though shocked at the verdict, the Stansted 15 remain defiant. Speaking to the *Guardian*, defendant Benjamin Smoke said, “We were charged with endangering life but we took the actions at Stansted to try to protect life... As a result of what we did 11 people who were on that flight are still in the UK appealing against their removals.”

Co-defendant Melanie Strickland condemned both the draconian legislation and government immigration policy. “To be found guilty of a terror-related charge for a peaceful

protest is devastating for us, and profoundly disturbing for democracy in this country,” she said. “It’s the Home Office’s brutal, secretive and barely legal practice of mass deportation flights that is putting people in danger, and their ‘hostile environment’ policy that is hurting vulnerable people from our communities. It’s the Home Office that should have been in the dock, not us.”

One man, who was on the plane to be deported but who has since been granted the right to remain, described his rescuers as “15 brave people... heroes not criminals... The Stansted 15 were trying to prevent the real crime being committed.”

Now that the trial has ended it can be reported that barristers for the defence argued, without the presence of the jury, that the jury should be discharged. Their grounds were that Justice Christopher Morgan in his summing up had directed them to convict. Before instructing them to deliberate, Morgan told the jury to discount the reasons the defendants gave for their actions on the evening of March 28—alleged abuse of human rights, immigration policy, consideration of proportionality—which he said did not have “any relevance.”

The defendants cited an example of one female detainee who feared she would be murdered by her abusive husband. Two were victims of human trafficking. Some feared torture and even death if they were returned.

Morgan nevertheless instructed the jury that the argument of “necessity,” when defendants break the law for the purpose of preventing greater harm, was inadmissible.

It is unprecedented to charge peaceful protesters under an act, brought in after the 1988 Lockerbie bombing, which is designed ostensibly to deal with terrorism.

Raj Chada of Hodge Jones and Allen, who defended the Stansted 15, told the *Independent* that his firm had been the defence in a similar case at Heathrow airport, but a different law was applied. In his opinion to use anti-terror legislation against a peaceful protest was “an abuse of power by the attorney general and Crown Prosecution Service.”

During the trial, Tony Badenoach QC, for the prosecution,

sought to prove the defendants had gravely compromised safety at the airport. This is clearly nonsense.

It was the migrants who were in danger. The peaceful protest of the Stansted 15 was to prevent the migrants on the tarmac being returned to horrifically unsafe conditions.

Every year tens of thousands flee war and impoverishment—a product of European Union and International Monetary Fund austerity policies and illegal military interventions by the Western imperialist powers—only to find impassable national borders and the right to asylum all but non-existent. They are treated as criminals and thrown into virtual concentration camps, in both Europe and America.

Corporate Watch, a “not-for-profit co-operative providing critical information on the social and environmental impacts of corporations and capitalism,” revealed that each month “ghost flights” take off from UK soil, forcibly removing migrants seeking asylum. This crime, which has been going on for years, is committed away from public sight and beyond the bounds of freedom of information requests.

In July 2013, to expedite this practice, Corporate Watch notes, “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.’”

Among its many victims are an unknown number of the Windrush generation, who have been deported without redress. Coming to the UK as children with their parents from the Commonwealth in the 1960s and 1970s, granted leave to remain by the 1971 Immigration Act but given no paperwork, they found themselves without proof of their right to residence required by subsequent legislation.

Human rights groups Amnesty International and Liberty condemned the trial and verdict against the Stansted 15 as an attack on democratic rights. Amnesty International UK Director Kate Allen said, “This is a crushing blow for human rights in the UK... It’s deeply disturbing that peaceful protesters, who caused disruption but at no time caused harm to anyone, should now be facing a possible lengthy prison sentence. This whole case will send a shiver down the spine of anyone who cares about the right to protest in our country.”

After the trial, the *Guardian* received a strongly worded letter from more than 300 concerned individuals and organisations calling for the fifteen to be spared prison. “It is the UK government’s brutal and unjust ‘hostile environment’ which should be found guilty of endangering human lives, and not the peaceful efforts of fifteen people to keep them safer.” Among the signatories are actor Emma Thompson, filmmakers Ken Loach and Mike Leigh,

musicians Tom Morello, Roger Waters, Brian Eno, Peter Gabriel, hip-hop artists Lowkey and Akala, and writers Alice Walker and Phillip Pullman.

Among the signatories were just 17 Labour Party Members of Parliament out of 257. Absent is the name of nominally left party leader Jeremy Corbyn. Only one trade union leader, Manual Cortes, signed.

Like the Conservatives, Labour supports controls on immigration. Corbyn’s shadow Brexit secretary Sir Keir Starmer touts a two-tier migration system, 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 has come out against freedom of movement, which he stated is “not a principle.” In relation to immigration, “Labour will do what is best for the economy” which means “managed migration.”

The Socialist Equality Party (UK) demands that the Stansted 15 be exonerated of all crimes and released immediately for what was a courageous act of international solidarity.

At its recently held Fourth Congress, the SEP declared its commitment “to champion the rights of immigrant workers, above all the refugees made homeless by the social and economic devastation created by imperialist intervention in their countries. The SEP defends the right to free movement, not just for European citizens but for workers throughout the world... Their defence is the cutting edge of the struggle to unite the working class across national boundaries in the struggle for socialism.”

The author recommends:

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

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