

# Stansted 15 anti-deportation protesters go free

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After being found guilty in December of offences which could have resulted in life imprisonment, the “Stansted 15” anti-deportation activists were spared prison sentences yesterday.

The Socialist Equality Party (UK) welcomes this victory and supports the ongoing appeal of the 15 to have their convictions quashed.

The Stansted 15 were found guilty of endangering safety at an airport, following a nine-week trial at Chelmsford Crown Court. They were convicted under the 1990 Aviation and Maritime Security Act, which was legislated after the 1988 Lockerbie bombing.

The supporters of the campaign group, End Deportations, were arrested in March 28, 2017 after they breached the perimeter fence at Stansted airport, and chained themselves around a government-chartered Boeing 767 to prevent take-off. Onboard the flight were 57 undocumented migrants from detention centres awaiting forced removal to Nigeria, Ghana and Sierra Leone. Some faced possible torture or death.

As a result of their brave actions, at least two of the refugees have since been granted permission to remain in the UK. Others are still pursuing their claims to stay.

The 15 were originally charged by Essex Police for aggravated trespass, for which there is a maximum sentence of three months in jail. Four months later, they were charged with the far more serious offence of endangering safety at an aerodrome. This move by the Crown Prosecution Service was clearly a politically motivated act.

Hundreds of supporters gathered outside Chelmsford Crown Court yesterday morning, blocking the road and chanting “Stansted 15, we are with you.” Others brought homemade placards with a wide variety of slogans such as, “We are all Stansted 15,” “Deportation Flights Kill” and “Prosecute the Home Office for Illegal Deportations.”

The crowd of defendants entered as walked the Judge Christopher Morgan gave three—Edward Thacker, Alistair Tamplit and Melanie Strickland—nine-month jail sentences, suspended for 18 months and the other 12 defendants 12-month community orders, with 11 ordered to carry out unpaid work.

Thacker, Tamplit and Strickland had already received suspended sentences for aggravated trespass as the result of a previous protest at Heathrow Airport. Morgan told them that they would not receive immediate jail sentences but had come “perilously close” to causing a disaster at the airport in pursuit of their cause.

“In normal circumstances only a normal custodial sentence would have been justified in this case, but in your case I accept that your intentions were to demonstrate,” he said. “There is no doubt that you understood that there were safety implications... You put at risk the safe operations of the airport and the persons who were there on the night.”

The BBC noted that in court Morgan faced arguments from a human rights barrister, Kirsty Brimelow QC, “about his duties to balance the question of airport security with the need to protect freedom of speech and assembly.”

That the 15 were not jailed is testimony to the widespread support they received nationally and internationally in their quest for freedom, as Strickland previously explained to the WSW.

Although they could have, the CPS did not bring the case to court as a terrorist crime or call on its specialized counter-terrorism unit to prosecute the case and use specialist barristers for this purpose. Like Morgan, they clearly felt that jailing any of the defendants and blatantly attacking their fundamental democratic rights to protest could be politically explosive.

The 15 are appealing to the Court of Appeal to have their convictions overturned on several grounds. They

argued in court that even though they may have technically broken the law, they had good reason as citizens for doing so. The judge instructed the jury to disregard that as a defence.

While avoiding jail sentences, the 15 were still found guilty and now have criminal records over their names, which could affect many aspects of their future lives including their employment prospects.

In their statement after sentencing, the Stansted 15 said, “These terror convictions and the ten-week trial that led to them are an injustice that has profound implications for our lives. The convictions will drastically limit our ability to work, travel and take part in everyday life. Yet, people seeking asylum in this country face worse than this: they are placed in destitution and their lives in limbo, by the Home Office’s vicious system every single day.”

“When a country uses draconian terror legislation against people for peaceful protest, snatches others from their homes in dawn raids, incarcerates them without time limit and forces them onto planes in the middle of the night, due to take them to places where their lives might be at risk, something is very seriously wrong. Every single one of us should be very worried about our democracy and our future.

“We demand that these convictions are quashed, and that the Government dismantles the vicious, barely legal, immigration system that destroys so many people’s lives.”

Amnesty International pointed out that nearly 12,000 of its supporters had sent the Stansted 15 messages of solidarity. It noted, “The case of the Stansted 15 follows a trend across Europe of people acting for migrants and refugees who have been harassed, intimidated and criminalized for their acts of solidarity.”

UK Director Kate Allen said, “The decision not to jail these brave human rights defenders is a relief, but not enough. They should never have faced this very serious terrorism-related charge in the first place. They remain convicted of an offence which simply doesn’t fit their actions and this trial could have a dangerous chilling effect on peaceful protest in this country. We hope the court of appeal will swiftly put an end to the distressing ordeal that the Stansted 15 have faced for nearly two years.”

The savage treatment and deportation of asylum seekers and refugees continues unabated. Just prior to Morgan announcing the sentence, the End Deportations group tweeted, “The judge has indicated that the #Stansted15 will all receive non-custodial sentences! If confirmed, it’s

right that they no longer face prison—but around the country, thousands of people are still locked up indefinitely in inhumane detention centres.”

The group noted, “This morning 40 men were flown back to Jamaica from Birmingham Airport on a flight that should not have taken off.” According to other reports, 35 men were deported, even though 11 had indefinite leave to remain in the UK, and 12 had lived in Britain for over 19 years. One of those deported lived in the UK for 41 years, having arrived as a four-year-old in 1977. Thirteen had come to the UK as children, with nine arriving in Britain under 10 years of age.

Home Secretary Sajid Javid defended the deportations, claiming that 29 of the men on board the flight were “serious foreign criminals.” No-one can take such claims at face-value.

The deportations to Jamaica are particularly significant as they demonstrate that the “hostile environment” towards immigrants and asylum seekers—a policy inaugurated by then Home Secretary and now Prime Minister Theresa May in 2013, during her time at the Home Office—continues.

This was the first charter deportation flight to Jamaica since the Windrush scandal wracked the May government last year, when it emerged that hundreds, perhaps thousands, of immigrants who arrived in the UK from Jamaica and other Commonwealth countries after the Second World War were subjected to illegal deportation. In the process many lost jobs, were split from their families and denied free healthcare and benefits—with some dying as a result of the callous treatment.

Yesterday’s mass deportation took place even before the “Windrush Lessons Learned” review, which May’s government convened as a damage limitation exercise, has even concluded.



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