

UK government steps up attacks on asylum seekers and refugees

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The Johnson government is escalating its attacks on the democratic rights of refugees and asylum seekers fleeing military, environmental, and economic devastation.

Coordination with Europe on “processing” asylum seekers will almost certainly cease when Brexit takes effect at the end of this year. Currently, the European Union’s (EU) Dublin Regulation allows Britain to return migrants to the European country they are deemed to have first arrived in. Without this agreement, under international law, whoever arrives in Britain has a right to stay until their asylum claim is processed.

The Conservative government has no intention of upholding the fundamental “right to asylum” section of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted in the aftermath of the Second World War. The Tories are busy putting together plans to deport migrant people as soon as they arrive. Proposals being considered include detaining them on disused ferries, disused North Sea oil platforms, or on remote islands thousands of miles away.

All options are being carefully costed and the implications assessed, with the *Guardian* reporting that a government source said new policies would be rolled out “to ‘discourage’ and ‘deter’ migrants from entering the UK illegally.” Legal advice to the government seen by the *Guardian* notes that the proposals would require “disapplying sections 77 and 78 of the Nationality Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 so that asylum seekers can be removed from the UK while their claim or appeal is pending.”

At the end of September the government stepped up its drive to deport asylum seekers, with many receiving a letter declaring that as a “failed asylum seeker” they would be evicted from the hotel accommodation they had been provided with during the pandemic. The letter from the Home Office stated that any support they received would end on October 7 and they had to take “all

reasonable steps to leave the United Kingdom. If you do not take reasonable steps to leave you face action to enforce your departure.”

Thousands of asylum seekers were provided with hotel accommodation during the pandemic, with the Home Office reviewing up to 3,000 cases for possible eviction.

Due to the “hostile environment” already established by Tory-led governments over the last 10 years, in 2019 the UK offered protection—in the form of asylum, humanitarian protection, alternative forms of leave and resettlement—to just 20,703 people. Per head of population, the UK came 19th in the number of asylum claims in the EU.

Many already kicked out of hotels are being sent into even worse accommodation, threatening their wellbeing, safety, and health. Last week, at least one asylum seeker housed in the former Napier army Barracks near Folkestone in Kent tested positive for coronavirus. More than 400 asylum seekers are being detained there. Referring to comments of a charity worker, the *Guardian* reported, “[T]here were about 32 men in each dormitory, 16 on each side of the room in close quarters. Screens had only recently been fitted between the beds, they said.”

On September 7, a man with a large knife entered a London law firm—whose name has not been made public—and launched what was described as a “violent, racist attack” injuring a member of staff. The person allegedly had in the bag on his person a confederate flag and far-right literature. The Law Society informed Conservative Home Secretary Priti Patel that they believed her diatribe, made only days before the attack, against “activist lawyers” who defend the rights of asylum seekers, was a main factor behind the attack. A document, including witness statement on the attack noted, “Responsibility and accountability for this attack, in the eyes of this firm, lies squarely at the feet of Priti Patel.”

The law firm wrote to the Law Society saying that Patel must end her “deliberately inflammatory rhetoric”, before, “innocent lives are taken and irreparable damage done to those who work in this field.”

Patel responded by doubling down on her rhetoric, denouncing at the Tory party conference “do-gooders” and “lefty lawyers” who are “defending the indefensible”. Prime Minister Boris Johnson followed up saying the criminal justice system was “being hamstrung by lefty human rights lawyers.”

These statements have strong echoes of US President Donald Trump’s method of “dog-whistling” to call his fascist base to action and are a chilling warning of the direction of travel in the ongoing assault on democratic rights.

Stoking up animosity to asylum seekers is taking place across the political divide. Earlier this month Labour peer Lord West, Baron West of Spithead, a retired Royal Navy admiral, said of asylum seekers during a BBC radio interview, “We can arrest as many as we like. Until we resolve the way we deal with them in this country and get agreement from France and other European nations to take them back then we’re stuck with them, and we need to deal with them in a concentrated place, whether it’s a camp or whatever.”

Many of these desperate, destitute people have had their homes demolished and lives destroyed by wars, such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan, in which Lord West played a prominent role as head of the Royal Navy at the time. Following his period as First Sea Lord, West was appointed Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Security and Counter-Terrorism at the Home Office in Gordon Brown’s Labour government.

West’s call for the building of concentration camps went unchallenged by the interviewer, compounding the outrage expressed by many on social media. One tweet read, “Horrendous broadcasting this morning as Admiral Lord Alan West of Spithead proposed in all seriousness Concentration Camps for Channel migrants prior to deportation without any challenge whatsoever. This was utterly despicable.” Another said, “How wicked to use this phrase that stirs up memories of atrocities, and to even make the suggestion. Vile, disgusting, evil.”

As well as referencing the horrors of the 20th century, others pointed to atrocities taking place today. “There are concentration camps, right now, in the USA where thousands of children have died from preventable diseases due to neglect, poor treatment and lack of medical care. That’s what Lord West is calling for because that’s what

these camps always result in.”

Making a half-apology, West said later, “I was trying to get across the point that working with other EU nations will help resolve this.”

European leaders agree with Lord West’s thinking of how to “deal with” the refugees they are “stuck with”. The Moria Reception and Identification Centre in Lesbos, Greece was built to house 2,800 people. By the time it burned to the ground last month, it housed 13,000 in inhumane conditions—nearly five times its capacity. Jean Ziegler of the committee of experts advising the UN Human Rights Council described Moria last year as “the recreation of a concentration camp on European soil.”

The newly built “Moria 2.0” is just as unbearable, with residents say they are living “worse than animals”. With poor sanitation and little access to water, residents are forced to wash their bodies and clothes in the sea. Queues for food and provisions stretch endlessly. Tents offer barely any protection from the weather. Those designed for one family are shared by several, and single men, often victims of torture, are packed inside large 200-capacity tents. Live ammunition lies on the ground of the camp, a former shooting range, easily found by the vulnerable children who live there.

Reflecting on the abysmal conditions, Carmen Dupont from Lesbos Solidarity, a charity working on the island, said, “There seems to be a very clear agenda linked to the migration pact and the European Union’s direction, which is of containment. Keeping people trapped and locked in inhumane camps in hellish conditions and at the same time, erasing and closing the dignified shelters that exist.”

In the UK and every country immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers are being used as scapegoats to shift the blame for the social ills of the failing capitalist system and to divide the working class. Workers in Britain must come to the defense of refugees and asylum seekers. The only way to end wars, environmental destruction and economic ruin that threatens entire populations and forces millions from their homes is through the struggle for socialism, encompassing all sections of the international working class.



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