

Clare Moseley on the horrific plight of English Channel migrants: “They are asking for help, but being treated like criminals”

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Clare Moseley, founder of refugee charity Care4Calais, spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about this week’s horrific deaths of asylum-seekers in the English Channel. Five members of an Iranian family, including three young children, died after their small inflatable dinghy capsized in rough seas off the coast of Dunkirk on Tuesday morning.

The deaths are the direct outcome of the xenophobic anti-migrant policies of the Johnson government and the entire British ruling class. This includes the deployment of Royal Navy vessels and drones against defenceless asylum seekers, stepped up deportations, and the internment of newly arrived refugees in concentration camp facilities in London, Wales and Kent.

Rasoul Irannazhad, 35, his wife Shewa Mohammed Panahi, 25, and their three children, Anita, Armin and Artin, aged nine, six, and 15 months, lost their lives. The family was from Sardasht in Iran, close to the Iraqi border. They were seeking political asylum in Britain.

WSWS: What was your reaction to the deaths on Tuesday of Rasoul Irannazhad and his young family?

Clare Moseley : The initial response was one of horror. It’s something that everybody knew could happen, but when it does, that’s something else isn’t it? It’s real, and it’s horrific. It’s real people. I didn’t know that family, but the people here are our friends, people we get to know—our volunteers play with their children. Some of our volunteers in the warehouse were in tears. I had to stand in front of them and tell them this had happened. I didn’t have any answers or anything wise to say—what can you say?

It’s not necessary. These are people who have come from terrible, horrific things in other parts of the world and they have come to Europe where they’re supposed to be safe. 48 hours before, those children would have been playing in the grass, telling you they wanted to go to school, and then their life is over. It’s deeply, deeply wrong and shocking.

The whole refugee community is shocked. Everybody is shaken by it. There are people thinking of making the journey even now, and as much as we wish they weren’t, it seems there are still people who are considering it. It’s terrifying.

WSWS: Rasoul and his family were reportedly in Calais and then moved to the refugee camp at Dunkirk?

CM: That wouldn’t be unusual. What tends to happen is that people arrive and slowly move into their community groups. Most Kurdish people are in Dunkirk, so it would make sense if they first arrived in Calais and then found out there were more people from their community in Dunkirk and moved there.

WSWS: I understand the camp in Calais was bulldozed by police in September. Could you explain what happened and give our readers some idea of the conditions in Calais as winter approaches.

CM: The conditions are awful. There have been continuous evictions all

this year. Every two days the police go in and move people on. People are continually hiding from the police. And then, every month or two, they do a really big clearance. They’ll surround a site early in the morning while people are asleep so they can’t get away, and they round people up and put them on buses, forcibly sometimes, and they’ll be sent away to other areas in France. Then they go in with bulldozers and other equipment and clear all their possessions which are left behind. All the tents, sleeping bags and things like that will be destroyed and thrown away. That happens fairly regularly, and it’s really horrible because when people come back, they don’t have anything at all.

WSWS: When people are bussed away by police, where are they taken?

CM: They are taken all over France. There was a clearance maybe only two weeks ago where people were taken to places in the same region of Calais. But the one before that, people were taken as far away as the Spanish border. So depending on how harsh it is, they can be taken a long way away. But we find after a few days some people come back.

WSWS: Where are refugees held when they are taken to these areas?

CM: It varies. It could be anything from a hotel to a more purpose-built centre. You tend to find that families are put in better quality accommodation, whereas men are put in pretty much anything. Sometimes a converted aircraft hangar. Quite often it’s a disused hotel. But one of the problems is that they are only offered proper accommodation if they are willing to claim asylum in France. France takes a lot more refugees than the UK. There are refugees all over France, but the ones who come to Calais seem to be those who have quite a strong reason to go to the UK. They might have family there or something like that.

WSWS: I understand that aid workers are having difficulty getting food to refugees in Calais due to a crackdown by French authorities. Could you explain the situation?

CM: Yes, that’s a really shocking development in recent months. They’ve put a ban on food distribution in quite a lot of the Calais area, which is horrific. It’s beyond belief really. Someone was asking, ‘Isn’t this against human rights law?’, which you’d expect it to be. Some of the French associations got together and took a case to the court saying you can’t stop us giving food to hungry people. I don’t know how, but they managed to lose the case and there is an appeal—but it’s kind of unthinkable isn’t it? That you could be banned from giving food to hungry people, but it’s happened.

Because the police actions have been so widespread, one of the problems that we’re having is that people are hiding from the police so that it’s hard for us to find them and give them food. If they are in any of the areas covered by the food ban, we’re not even allowed to give them food. I just don’t have words for it, I’m sorry. You can’t even imagine it—in Europe in this century, that we’re unable to give food to hungry people.

WSWS: What sort of places are people hiding in and what are your concerns, especially with winter approaching?

CM: Up until maybe six months ago, quite a lot of people were staying on pieces of scrappy woodland or little patches of land around the edges of town. But what the police have been doing is going to those places and cutting down swathes of trees, so that all the land is open. If you do put tents up, the police will see and take them down. So that means they can't even sleep in tents in many areas. Some of the worst things I've seen are people sleeping on the tarmac with no covering in disused petrol stations. There are people sleeping homeless in the town centre, pretty much like homeless people you'd see in other towns, in shop doorways or parks, under benches or just wherever they can get out of sight of the police.

WSWS: How many people would you say this is affecting right now in Calais? How many migrants are there?

CM: They are very dispersed. I would say there's about 1,000 people and then maybe another 400 or 500 in Dunkirk.

WSWS: What is your response to the Johnson government's statements in recent days blaming "people smugglers" for the deaths of migrants in the English Channel?

CM: I completely reject that proposition. I agree that people smugglers are terrible. Anyone who profits off someone else's suffering is terrible, but I think it's misleading to blame people smugglers. They are a symptom rather than the cause of the problem. The issue is that we have people here who want a fair hearing for their asylum claims, but the only way they can get it is to be physically present in Britain, and the only way they can get there is by making a really dangerous journey. If they had an alternative, if they felt there was another way, I am certain they would take it. These are ordinary people. They do not want to get on a boat and they most certainly do not want to put their children on a boat. If we gave them an alternative, they would take it and that would put the people smugglers out of business.

I've been here nearly six years now and every single year I see the same policies—'We're going to crack down on people smugglers', 'We're going to spend more on security', 'We're going to work with the French more', but nothing ever changes. There's a massive weight of evidence that the policies don't work and yet they're still following the same policies. They don't really care, because if they did they would look at alternative solutions.

WSWS: How do refugees apply for asylum in Britain and what are the obstacles they face?

CM: To apply for asylum in Britain, you must be physically present in Britain and there's no way to get there. That means that they have to make an illegal journey. Refugee law recognises that and says you shouldn't be penalised for that because it's not your fault. These are people who might never have broken a law in their lives. They certainly don't want to take these risks.

WSWS: There are new laws being discussed in the UK that would see refugees removed from the UK while their claim or appeal for asylum is pending. The Home Office has drafted proposals to send asylum-seekers to remote islands, disused ferries, and abandoned oil platforms in the North Sea.

CM: They are scarily similar to the way they do things in Australia. The Australian system is one of the most shocking, inhumane and brutal systems there is. Is that the one we want to copy?

WSWS: What is the feeling among the refugees in Calais about the treatment they face?

CM: They don't understand. They come here because they believe we have human rights and democracy, we have laws to protect people. If you come from somewhere like Eritrea or Iran where there is a dictatorship and where human rights are not respected, they come here expecting Europe to be better. It's incomprehensible to them why they're being treated this way. They expect us to have laws to protect individuals. And

as far as they are concerned, they haven't broken any laws, they are not criminals, they don't want to hurt anybody. They are coming here asking for help. The way they are treated in France is horrible. And the way they are treated in the UK is becoming horrible. You go into the hotels and barracks in the UK and everyone is absolutely terrified of being deported. I spoke to a Syrian person who was to be deported. He asked me 'How is the UK deporting Syrians? I thought the UK had laws to protect people?' And to me that really is the crux of the problem. This guy had been tortured extensively in Syria, and yet we have put him through the hell of being detained and deported from the UK, such a traumatic experience.

For me personally—and I can't speak on behalf of Care4Calais—borders are nothing but an historical marker at one point in time, and they change all the time. They are just an arbitrary historical marker. If you want to speak at a higher level—they are just put in place by man.

When you work in Calais with people who have fled dictatorship, from Iran or Eritrea, the essence is that individuals don't have rights. The government or the dictator has absolute power and there's nobody to protect individuals. They come here because that system we have, where there are human rights, where there are courts and judges and lawyers to protect individuals. But what's happening in the UK is that we are undermining those rights through changes in the law to attack lawyers and through everything that is happening we're taking away that system and nobody seems to understand how incredibly valuable it is. We shouldn't be letting it be taken away, because in the end we will stop being a country that refugees run to and will become a country that refugees are running from.

WSWS: Could I ask about your own personal background and what led you to found Care4Calais?

CM: I was a chartered accountant working at Deloitte for 14 years. I was a corporate and finance type person who knew nothing about politics, or anything else. I accidentally went to Calais for the weekend and saw the situation and I had this kind of life-changing moment. I felt like I had to do something. So, I stayed there, I never left. A complete accident. I was really shocked that this could happen in the middle of Europe and I thought it was just a temporary situation that we would have to manage until somebody more important could come along and fix it. I never dreamed that it would stay like this for years. And then I started to read about politics and about what's going on and just got more and more shocked.

WSWS: What does Care4Calais do and how have things changed in the five years you have been there?

CM: Care4Calais does four things. Firstly, we deliver direct aid to refugees who are sleeping rough in France and Belgium—clothes, food and sleeping bags. The second thing we do is we try to combat the French and UK government's policy of deterrence. Essentially, they try to break their spirit, through the evictions, lack of heat, through lack of food and protection from the elements. So, we try and combat that through social policies, making them feel like somebody cares about them. In the UK we campaign for more tolerance and welcoming of refugees. And we've also started a new programme in the UK to work with newly arrived refugees.

The thing about refugees is that they are running away from things that are so bad that they can't go back. That's the whole point of being a refugee. This is borne out by my own experience. I have met so many people who have had terrible things happen to them, even their asylum claims being denied, but you never meet a refugee who says, 'I'm going home'. It just doesn't happen.

WSWS: There are some 80 million refugees in the world—the largest number in world history. What is driving refugees to flee their homes and what is the role of governments in the UK and US in this?

CM: Calais always reflects the worst things that are going on in the world. When I first arrived, there were people from Syria, and then maybe a year-and-a-half ago Trump really tightened his sanctions on Iran, and I

started to see more Iranians. Maybe six months ago, we started to see more people from Yemen. Whatever is the worst thing that is going on in the world, that is what we see in Calais.



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