

UK “Borders Bill” criminalises asylum-seekers

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UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s Conservative government’s Nationality and Border Bill has passed its second reading in parliament by 366 votes to 265.

The Bill criminalises asylum-seekers and migrants, overturns the United Nations 1951 Refugee Convention and significantly strengthens the power of border agencies.

Its reading coincided with the government’s so-called “Freedom Day” on July 19, when it lifted all remaining protections to mitigate the Covid-19 pandemic, despite cases soaring.

Home Secretary Priti Patel claimed the Bill will “increase the fairness of our system” and “break the business model of people smuggling gangs”. It does nothing of the sort.

The government has already blocked all “legal” means for migrants to reach Britain, through fines on airlines and other transportation companies for allowing someone to travel without a visa. Between 2015 and 2019, less than 5,000 people a year were able to come to the UK through official channels. This at a time when the annual number of refugees worldwide rose from 15.48 million to 20.45 million, and the number of asylum-seekers from 2.32 million to 4.15 million. In 2020, due to the pandemic, asylum applications fell to 29,456, compared to 93,475 applications in France and 121,955 in Germany.

The official policy of creating a “hostile environment” for migrants and refugees means those arriving already face appalling conditions. On Sunday, an unidentified 24-year old Sudanese asylum seeker was found dead in a hotel near Heathrow airport. He had reportedly been housed at the Crowne Plaza, used by the government for asylum seekers, for four months, after several months sleeping rough in Calais. He is among some 29 asylum-seekers who had died in Home

Office accommodation in the last year.

Many asylum seekers, often fleeing persecution and torture, that were placed in hotels during the pandemic are being “decanted” into barracks and similar inhuman accommodation. This follows the xenophobic campaign by former UK Independence Party leader, Nigel Farage, charging that migrants were living in “luxury” at “tax-payers expense.”

The Napier Barracks in Folkestone, a former military garrison, witnessed a mass outbreak of Covid-19 among its 300 detainees, followed by a fire that left many without electricity, heating or drinking water. There are also reports of children being placed in immigration removal centres with no concern for their welfare.

Nonetheless, the government and media are attempting to stoke a right-wing frenzy over desperate migrants braving the Channel crossing in tiny vessels to reach Britain, virtually the only route now open to them.

Some 8,000 people, including many women and children, have made the perilous journey this year. On Saturday, a small inflatable with 12 migrants from Iran, North and Eastern Africa, including children too young to walk, were filmed landing on the beach at Dungeness, Kent. They were some of more than 430 people estimated to have made the crossing that day.

The bill also criminalises those attempting to help refugees by redefining the offence of “facilitating” illegal immigration. While the pretext is clamping down on “people smugglers”, the real target is those providing humanitarian assistance. The volunteer Royal National Lifeboat Institution was derided by Farage as “a taxi service for illegal immigration” when it released a craft to search for the migrant boat in distress off the coast at Dungeness. The clear intent is to leave

migrants to drown.

Those who do make it to shore will be classed as “illegal” immigrants, as only those making a resettlement claim from abroad, before arriving in Britain, will be considered. The maximum sentence for entering the country via “unofficial means” is to be increased from six months to four years.

These measures jettison the 1951 Convention which recognised that refugees, forced to flee by irregular routes, may be without visas, and protected those assisting refugees on humanitarian grounds from prosecution.

The Bill will increase the reliance of refugees and migrants on the real people-smugglers. The “business model” of these operations, referred to by Patel, depends on the wreckage caused by imperialism's plunder of the globe. The decades of war inflicted by the major powers in the Middle East and Africa especially has caused the collapse of entire countries, widespread economic and social dislocation to which must now be added the catastrophe of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Significantly, the Bill enables the setting up of offshore “accommodation and reception centres” in Europe and Africa. Patel is reportedly in discussions with Denmark's social democratic government to share an immigration centre in Rwanda. Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen's government last month adopted legislation enabling it to open asylum centres outside Europe. Those submitting an asylum application at the Danish border are to be flown to Africa while it is processed.

Attacks on asylum rights are escalating across Europe. In Sweden, under measures piloted by the Social Democrat-Green government, residence permits for refugees will be time-limited. In Spain, the Socialist Party-Podemos government, with European Union backing, has deployed the army to drive back migrants attempting to cross the border between Morocco and Spain's North African enclave of Ceuta.

This underscores the critical role in the assault on migrants played by the social democratic and pseudo-left parties that are increasingly adopting the slogans and policies of the far right. This is epitomised by the nationalist diatribe penned by Germany's Left Party leader, Sahra Wagenknecht, denouncing migrants and refugees as wage depressors, strike-breakers, and

foreign cultural elements.

Britain is also working with France to strengthen border patrols.

This week, London agreed to pay Paris £54 million to double its anti-migrant police to 200, twice the amount it had initially settled on in November.

The agreement came under attack, with Tory MP Tim Loughton complaining that French border patrols “are not doing their part” to prevent crossings. One former immigration official called for the British military to be called in as the UK's Border Force is just “operating a collection service from the Channel.”

Increasingly, the language used is one of war, with talk of migrant's “massing” on the French coast, and of a refugee “invasion.” A major factor behind such hysteria is intimidating opposition to the anti-migrant campaign. In January, protestors who broke into Stansted Airport in 2017 to stop a jet deporting people to Africa, won their appeal against convictions usually meted out to terrorists. In Glasgow in May, hundreds surrounded immigration officials attempting to detain two asylum-seekers, forcing their release.

The measures have been condemned by refugee agencies, with the United Nations describing the bill as a “neo-colonial approach”. The opposition Labour Party tabled an amendment to Patel's Bill that, while referencing the breach of the 1951 Convention, focussed on government incompetence over migration. Even this milquetoast complaint was overwhelmingly defeated.

The persecution and criminalisation of refugees and asylum-seekers will not be stopped by appeals to “reason” directed to the powers-that-be. In the UK, as in every country, immigrants and asylum-seekers are being scapegoated for the capitalist crisis and to legitimise police state measures that will be used against the entire working class. Defending migrant rights and defeating the turn to authoritarianism requires the combined force of the international working class against capitalism and for socialism.



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