

UK: Far-right violence amid Knowsley anti-migrant protest

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An anti-migrant protest was held outside the Suites Hotel housing asylum seekers in Knowsley, northwest England, last Friday.

Roughly 300 people from the local area were involved initially, before around 150 far-right protesters joined later. Some threw fireworks and a group attacked a police van with hammers before setting it alight. One police officer and two members of the public suffered light injuries. Fifteen people were arrested on suspicion of violent disorder, mostly from the local area.

A counter-demonstration of around 100 people was cordoned in a surrounded car park.

Far-right agitators had played a significant part in the protest from the start. A video purporting to show an encounter between a 15-year-old girl and a 25-year-old man asking for her phone number was shared heavily, initially in fascist circles, from February 7, with the unfounded claim that the man was an asylum seeker. It quickly gained a wider audience.

Three days before, the far-right group Patriotic Alternative had turned up outside the Suites Hotel with a banner reading, “Europe belongs to the European.” Members distributed several hundred leaflets with the slogan, “5-star hotels for migrants whilst Brits freeze.”

Britain First had targeted Suites Hotel in January.

After a police investigation into the social media video was reported by a local news organisation, posters on its Facebook page linked the alleged event to the Suites Hotel, amid a stream of right-wing, anti-migrant comments.

A protest was organised among local people for Friday evening. On the night, according to 59-year-old Alan Marsden speaking to the *Independent*, “women and children initially made up a significant portion of the crowd but the character of the event changed when ‘kids with masks and balaclavas on turned up’.”

The police said similarly that “‘a number of people,

who were not part of the original protest group’ arrived after the start of the demonstration... They turned up armed with hammers and fireworks to cause as much trouble as they could”.

Events in Knowsley are a warning of what will come if the ceaseless flow of toxic anti-migrant agitation and Islamophobia from the Conservative government and the Labour Party is not countered by the development of a socialist movement in the working class.

Organised fascist groups in the UK are small, numbering collectively a few thousand. But they tap into and benefit from the incessant anti-migrant, anti-refugee rhetoric of the main capitalist parties and the mainstream media.

In the press, the *Sun*, the *Daily Mail* and the *Express*, and the house paper of the Tory party the *Daily Telegraph*, publish countless headlines demonising asylum seekers as dangerous and living the high life off taxpayers’ money.

The Conservative government is naked in its witch-hunting of asylum seekers. Following a far-right firebomb attack on an asylum processing centre in Dover last October, Tory Home Secretary Suella Braverman denounced “the invasion on our southern coast,” tarring asylum seekers crossing the Channel in small boats as “members of criminal gangs”.

At her party’s conference last year, she spoke of her “dream” *Telegraph* front page on the successful deportation of asylum seekers to Rwanda. Her predecessor Priti Patel was so ferocious in her denunciation of rights groups and legal professionals defending migrants that government lawyers advised her that she risked provoking attacks.

The connection between official anti-asylum rhetoric and what took place at Knowsley was underscored by a February 15 *Guardian* article bemoaning the efforts of the fascist Patriotic Alternative to “co-opt” and “infiltrate

other campaigns”. It cited South West Bedfordshire Tory MP Andrew Selous, and the Mayor of Dunstable issuing a statement “telling residents that a public meeting [organised by the Tory MP] about a local hotel in receipt of a contract to house asylum seekers had not been organised by extremists... after residents received leaflets purporting to be from Patriotic Alternative, urging people to attend the meeting.”

Violent prejudice against Muslims is rife at all levels of the Tory Party. The government is currently overseeing a review of the Prevent scheme, established by Labour, to redouble its focus on stigmatising Muslims and deflect attention from the fastest growing threat of right-wing terror.

The anti-asylum campaign has the unswerving support of the Labour Party. Various apologists for Labour have laid great stress on its opposing the Rwanda deportations plan. But it does so only on the grounds of cost and effectiveness, with Shadow Home Secretary Rachel Reeves telling *Sky News*, “The Conservatives have been in government for 12 years now and illegal immigration is on the increase so this is a problem that’s been made under their watch. They need to process claims faster, get people out of the country if they’ve got no right to be here...”

Asked if she supported legislation to make it easier to deport people, Reeves added, “Well the problem is the Government are not deporting people today even when their claims have failed.”

The pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party pays lip-service to these issues, with its comment on Knowsley making routine denunciations of the Tories while only blandly declaring that the “Labour Party is no shield against the racist threat.” It advocates only the mobilisation of various anti-racist groups, mostly in and around the Labour Party, to confront the “fascist threat” while speaking vaguely of uniting the strike movement against the government with a defence of asylum seekers.

Its real venom is reserved for those drawn into the original anti-refugee protest, who are lumped in with the fascists as “450 thugs”. No explanation is offered of why a section of local people, many of whom would resent being associated with the fascists, ended up protesting outside the Suites hotel swept up by anti-asylum-seeker propaganda, Islamophobia and stories of child abuse and abduction threats.

The far right’s “feather bedding” in “luxury hotels” rhetoric plays to widespread anger generated by the appalling social hardship suffered by local residents and

direct this into the scapegoating of migrants and asylum seekers. But the conditions exploited, just like the climate of anti-migrant hysteria, are the shared responsibility of the Tory and Labour parties.

Knowsley has the second highest rates of deprivation in the UK, with more than 40 percent of all children living below the poverty line. This translates into massive anti-Tory sentiment and support for the Labour Party. It has been run by Labour since its creation in 2010—with election majorities of 70 to 85 percent. In 2015, it became the safest seat in the country in absolute votes and in 2017 delivered Labour’s George Howarth the highest percentage majority for any British member of parliament since the advent of universal suffrage.

In return, Labour has dutifully imposed Tory cuts without political challenge, with former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and his Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell instructing Labour councils to obey government-mandated budgets. Today Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer now declares there is no “magic money tree” to address the social crisis in a deliberate echo of Tory propaganda that reinforces claims of migrants taking scarce housing, education and health care resources away from “British workers.”

Workers must guard against the growth of the far right, but this means the systematic education and mobilisation of the working class against the Tory government and its accomplices in the Labour Party, based on a fight for working class unity and socialism. It means combating the bitter legacy of political confusion created by decades of Labourism in Liverpool, Knowsley and other inner-city areas, and convincing workers that asylum seekers forced to flee their own countries and workers forced to choose whether to heat or eat face a common struggle against all those insisting on sacrificing their basic needs to the demands of private profit and the war plans of the imperialist governments.



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