

UK government plans mass detention and expulsion of asylum seekers

Thomas Scripps
7 March 2023

On Tuesday, the UK government published details of a plan to immediately and permanently deny the right to asylum to almost all migrants who enter the UK on a small boat.

An Illegal Migration Bill will apply a “rights brake,” severely restricting their ability to appeal to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), to which the UK is a signatory, or to the UK’s own modern slavery laws.

People who cross the English Channel on small boats will be immediately detained without bail or judicial review for 28 days. A duty will be placed on ministers to remove them “as soon as reasonably practicable”, with grounds for suspending removal limited to those under 18, medically unfit to fly, or at a real risk of serious and irreversible harm in the country they are being deported to. Home Secretary Suella Braverman pointedly referred to this legal bar in Parliament as “exceedingly high”. All other claims would have to be “heard remotely after removal.”

Those denied asylum after reaching the UK in this way would be permanently barred from entering the UK in the future.

This is the policy of a police state. It was introduced to parliament by Braverman using the fascistic, scaremongering language of Donald Trump, referring to “waves of illegal migrants... 100 million people around the world [the global number of refugees]... They are coming”.

If enacted, the law would deprive tens of thousands of people of their democratic rights every year and lead to the huge expansion of internment camps in Britain.

Roughly 28,000 people entered the UK on small boats in 2021, another 45,000 in 2022, and another 2,950 so far this year—giving an annual projection of 65,000.

People make this dangerous crossing—which is believed to have killed 52 people, including children, since 2018—to flee war, persecution, hunger and poverty at

home. Most will already have risked even more perilous journeys—across the Mediterranean Sea or by foot through Europe—to make it to the French coast. Those drowned in the Channel include Iraqi and Iranian Kurds, Afghans, Ethiopians, Somalis, Vietnamese, Senegalese and Egyptians.

These are victims of British imperialism and its allies, whose wars abroad, backing of dictatorial regimes, economic exploitation of oppressed countries, and abandonment of their populations to the consequences of climate change have created the biggest refugee crisis in history.

The government has used a recent increase in the numbers of Albanians making the journey to try to pull the wool over workers’ eyes about what is happening, claiming the UK is being overwhelmed by purely economic migrants with no legal right to stay in the UK. This is a lie.

Albanians made up the largest proportion of any country of origin for small boat arrivals in 2022, but this was still just 28 percent of the total. Secondly, more than half the people from Albania applying for asylum receive it (55 percent in the first half of 2022), because being returned home would infringe their basic human rights.

Overall, fully two-thirds of those who crossed the Channel last year would be granted asylum, according to analysis by the Refugee Council, half of them from Afghanistan, Iran, Eritrea, Sudan or Syria.

These thousands of people use illegal routes because they have no other choice. Outside of specific schemes for some Afghans, Ukrainians, and Hong Kongers with British National (Overseas) status, the UK offers only extremely limited refugee resettlement and family reunion schemes as legal pathways to asylum. Barely more than 6,000 people were allowed into the country in this way in September 2021-22.

Under the proposed law, everyone else who arrives

would be subjected to a de facto blanket policy of imprisonment. The UK government currently has no agreements in place to remove asylum seekers to passed-through European countries where they could previously have claimed for asylum, or to their home countries. Its barbaric plan to ship vulnerable people to Rwanda is not functional.

In these circumstances there is no reason to believe migrants will be detained for just 28 days. There are currently 160,000 people in the UK with pending asylum applications and the government is working night and day to dismantle the current system of housing them in hotels and sheltered accommodation—through underfunding and xenophobic rhetoric. Braverman referred repeatedly on Tuesday to the costs of asylum accommodation and her efforts to end the “farce of accommodating migrants in hotels.”

Asylum seekers denied even a legal hearing will therefore increasingly be held indefinitely in a network of detention camps, holding tens of thousands more people every year.

Conditions in migrant detention and processing centres are already inhumane. Last October, a scandal broke out over the appalling treatment of migrants held in the overcrowded Manston holding centre. Designed to accommodate 1,000 people, the former Royal Air Force base was holding 4,000 in what were described as “wretched conditions”, with detainees suffering violent abuse and outbreaks of scabies, norovirus, diphtheria and MRSA. A coroner’s inquest is ongoing into the death of one migrant who had tested positive for diphtheria.

With state spending cut to the bone and given the explosive conditions which would prevail in dozens of camps of thousands of people, their expansion would depend on the police and armed forces. An army detachment was held on standby during the Manston events. In January 2022, the Navy was involved in policing the Channel through Operation Isotope, along with 200 personnel mainly drawn from the army.

Given the scale of the operation required and the inevitable legal clashes in the European Court, there is a possibility that the government’s new plans will flounder. Its announcements are an attempt to energise its far-right constituency and whip up xenophobic feeling in sections of the working class abandoned by the Labour Party and the trade unions. But in doing so, the Tories are running ahead of what the state apparatus can accomplish in such a short space of time.

But whatever its time frame or exact form, the extreme

right-wing trajectory of the government’s asylum policy is clear and will be facilitated by a complicit Labour Party.

Britain’s nominal opposition offers no defence of democratic rights whatsoever. Its criticisms of Tory policies amount to calls on the government to try harder.

Responding to Braverman in parliament Tuesday, Shadow Home Secretary Yvette Cooper began, “The government has allowed criminal gangs to take hold along the Channel and along our border. At the same time, convictions of people smugglers have halved... costly, inappropriate hotel use has soared, removals of unsuccessful asylum seekers are down 80 percent on the last Labour government”.

Against previous Tory policies to crack down on migration which “did not work” and “didn’t deter anyone”, Labour had “put forward plans for a cross-border police unit, for fast-tracked decisions and returns, to clear the backlog and end hotel use”.

Britain’s capitalist parties are conspiring to create a viciously right-wing, anti-migrant political climate. They are scapegoating a few tens of thousands of people to distract from the crimes committed by British imperialism in their home countries and to turn British citizens against their fellow workers from abroad, rather than the multi-hundred millionaires and billionaires who keep all workers impoverished.

This is done to prepare ever more authoritarian laws directed against the working class. A ruling class prepared to deny rights to tens of thousands of refugees and imprison them en masse is also preparing to deny millions of British workers the right to strike and protest. And the army has been mobilised to break strikes by health workers and to police migrants.

The world’s capitalist governments are shredding the living standards built up by workers over decades of struggle to fuel the bottomless appetites of the super-rich and a war against Russia in Ukraine threatening to spiral into a global conflict. This is incompatible with democratic rights, which are under assault on all fronts.

Waging a counteroffensive means uniting the international working class against the divide-and-rule strategies of the ruling class, in a struggle for socialism.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact