

Peaceful asylum seekers' protests smashed by UK security officers

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Last November, Labour Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood outlined “Restoring Order and Control” plans severely restricting the rights of asylum seekers. These were so vicious that the far-right Reform UK party led by Nigel Farage said it could hardly better them.

These came together with a “one in, one out” agreement with France: Labour’s response to the far-right-led clamour to stop the small boat crossings made by asylum seekers across the Channel.

Formalised last August, it was agreed that France would accept a returned asylum seeker arriving in the UK via a small boat in return for a migrant in France seeking asylum in the UK who had not attempted a small boat crossing. Those selected from France would be subjected to security and eligibility checks.

By January 5 this year, 193 asylum seekers had been returned to France, and 195 others had been granted access to the UK.

On the evening of January 14, around 100 asylum seekers at Harmondsworth near Heathrow airport and Brook House near Gatwick airport protested over being issued tickets and told they were being put on a flight to France the following day. Harmondsworth and Brook House are the main detention centres where asylum seekers slated for removal under “one in, one out” are held.

The *Guardian*, the only national newspaper to report the protests, said they were co-ordinated across both camps. It reported: “Detainees told the *Guardian* they were peacefully resisting being taken to the airport because they believed that while France was generally a safe country, it was not safe for some of them who had received threats from people smugglers. Some also fear that under European Union law they will be returned to another EU country and from there forcibly returned to their country of origin, where they believe their lives may be in danger.”

Detainees said another grievance was the arbitrary nature of the scheme whereby some asylum seekers would be able to have their asylum claim processed in the UK others faced being forcibly removed to France.”

The intention was to hold a peaceful demonstration, but migrants were immediately punished.

One message sent to the *Guardian* explained: “All is good. More than 60 here [at Harmondsworth] and 50 at Brook House, all protesting in a very nice and safe way. We are in the hall they locked the doors. We can’t go to toilet or have a rest or eat and drink. We don’t know what they gonna do next. Please help us. Do whatever u can for us.”

More messages from the protestors in the early hours of Thursday morning described how the situation rapidly deteriorated as security officers with dogs and riot shields were sent in to brutally smash up the protest. According to the *Guardian*, they also used teargas. One protestor messaged the newspaper at 2.14 a.m. saying he had pain in his head after being beaten and had been locked in a solitary cell.

Another detainee not due to be flown out, but who had supported the protest, messaged the newspaper at 3.33 a.m. to say, “They brought special forces for us, they used [teargas], they took us by force inside rooms, they took the ones who have tickets by force. We are in pain; our eyes and bodies are burning.”

The Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants responded to the assault: “This cruel UK-France scheme ultimately amounts to state sanctioned human trafficking. We stand in complete solidarity with their demands.”

Prior to the protest, asylum seekers held at Harmondsworth—including some from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Sudan, states all devastated by imperialist war and oppression—documented the “fear, humiliation and psychological distress” caused by their treatment in the UK.

One of the reports notes that many of the detainees are young adults between 17 and 30. It states, “There have been multiple incidents involving individuals experiencing severe mental health crises, including self-harm attempts. Detainees report being placed in isolation or disciplinary units. This environment has created constant fear, despair, and uncertainty, with detainees expressing that they feel dehumanised and invisible.”

Not only have detainees been refused decisions on their asylum claims, they also have no access to lawyers.

As the policy was agreed last year, Louise Calvey, the Asylum Matters Executive Director stated, “The ‘one-in-one-out’ plan is yet another attack on the human right to seek sanctuary. In reinforcing the criminalisation of people exercising their legal right to seek asylum, our Government continues to ignore the Refugee Convention—which permits travel by irregular means to seek sanctuary—and punish people for using the only means available to them to reach safety.”

“It’s a grubby trade in human lives that will do nothing more than remove people from this country back into the hands of people smugglers. It will send them back to French shores where they’ll face escalating police violence: boats being slashed with families onboard, children being teargassed, violence which we know makes Channel crossings even more dangerous.”

The Medical Justice charity which sends independent clinicians into immigration detention centres also called for the “one in one out” scheme to be scrapped. It surveyed 33 migrants awaiting deportation to France and said there was a “near total disregard for identified vulnerabilities,” adding that the scheme failed to protect trafficking and torture survivors.

One of the documents drawn up by the asylum seekers, “Report on conditions and treatment at Harmondsworth Immigration Removal Centre”, stated that the detainees had come to Britain “in the pursuit of safety, dignity and a chance to live a peaceful life”. But such is their treatment that they are demanding the United Nations and human rights groups urgently investigate conditions.

After the *Guardian* article appeared, six MPs tabled an early day motion on January 12, calling on the government “to launch an immediate inspection of the treatment and conditions of these detained asylum seekers.” This basic request has fallen on deaf ears in Parliament. Ten days later, the EMD has received a total of just 17 signatures including, eight Labour MPs.

Mahmood’s plans include granting successful asylum seekers “core protection”. But this still means a potential

20-year wait before achieving permanent status.

Mimicking the role of Trump’s gestapo-like Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) squads in the US, the Labour government is meanwhile stepping up immigration enforcement raids.

The Home Office boasted in a January 12 press release that “Illegal working arrests and raids have reached the highest level in UK history... the number of raids [has] soared by 77 percent in the UK since the government came into power, leading to an 83 percent rise in arrests (July 2024 to end of December 2025.” It stated there were 17,400 raids and over 12,300 arrests.

A *Construction News* article of January 7 noted, “The number of immigration arrests on UK construction premises during the first nine months of 2025 was almost three times the 2024 figure and the highest for at least a decade... from January to September there were 206 immigration enforcement visits at construction premises, with 477 people arrested.”

Seeking to implement a key goal of the far-right, Labour is also committed to closing hotels which have been repurposed to accommodate asylum seekers. In a dog-whistle to the far-right the Home Office announced they would shift asylum seekers into other accommodation including former barracks. Adopting the language of the fascists—who sieged hotels for months last summer demanding the asylum seekers who were living in “luxury” be kicked out and deported—on Thursday the government moved 27 asylum seekers into barracks at the former Crowborough training camp in Sussex. This was part of its “mission to end the use of expensive hotels”, with Mahmood saying, “Crowborough is just the start”.



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