

Two British ports turn away lifeboats with rescued migrants, amid far-right blockades

Robert Stevens
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Two Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) lifeboats carrying around 120 people rescued from an overcrowded dinghy in the Channel were refused permission to land at Southampton and Portsmouth on September 6. The crew of the Bembridge and Yarmouth lifeboats were warned that entering either port or its approaches would bring their criminal prosecution.

The dinghy had launched overnight from a beach east of Cherbourg in the Bay of the Seine, on France's Normandy coast, some 230 miles west of Calais—the longest crossing yet attempted, as policing of French beaches intensifies. The French coastguard shadowed the vessel but did not intervene, citing the risk to life aboard.

The RNLI lifeboats intercepted the dinghy off the Isle of Wight and completed their rescue. After being refused at Dover and Southampton, the lifeboats were diverted to Eastney Ferry Landing in Langstone Harbour, Portsmouth.

Eastney sits on a peninsula with only one road in and out. This was blockaded for hours by a far-right masked mob of around 200, delaying the asylum seeker coaches. The mob remained in the area until the early hours of Monday morning.

The obscene pushback of the lifeboats took place as Britain's main far-right party, Reform UK, was holding its largest conference (September 3-5) to date. It saw party leader Nigel Farage and National Rally president Jordan Bardella sign a memorandum of understanding pledging, upon they take power, to end small-boat arrivals from France "forever."

The pact expanded Reform's "Operation Fortress," under which the Royal Navy, Royal Marines, Royal Air Force and Army units would intercept small boats and return them to the French or Belgian coast.

The Eastney blockade was carried out by fascist thugs who had already targeted Dover, a main point of entry for migrants, the day before. At around 7.30 am on Saturday (September 5)—with the Reform conference about to begin its final day—between 300 and 400 masked fascists chanting "stop the boats" closed the roads into Britain's busiest ferry

port for hours, halting ferry traffic between England and France.

The action was organised by Patriot Platform, founded in July by Daniel Thomas, aka Danny Tommo. He is a former bodyguard and close associate of far-right leader Robinson. A convicted criminal, Thomas was sentenced in 2016 to two years in prison for attempted kidnapping.

The following day, as news spread around lunchtime that the dinghy from Normandy had been intercepted in UK waters, and was being brought to Eastney Marina, Thomas called on protesters to converge on the district on Portsmouth's eastern shore.

Dover is officially classified as critical national infrastructure, falling under the protection of the security service, MI5. Despite this, the far-right were allowed to cause mass disruption, halting some of the UK's major transport links to the continent. Not a single person was arrested.

Initially Kent Police described the Dover blockade as "spontaneous", claiming no prior knowledge of it. Facts disprove this.

The *Guardian*, citing evidence provided by the anti-fascist organisation, Hope Not Hate, reported on Tuesday: "Police were told the night before far-right agitators blocked roads into Dover that those involved had converged on a village 18 miles away [Preston-next-Wingham] and planned to use it as a launchpad". It added, "At least one person is understood to have sought to pass on details to counter-terrorism police after people heard the far-right activists boasting in the local pub that they intended to go to Dover and 'attack Muslims'." The article notes that "information was passed on to police but little or no interest was shown in the tipoff," according to Hope Not Hate."

Sir Roger Gale, Conservative MP for Herne Bay and Sandwich, a Preston-next-Wingham resident, contacted police on finding a car park and recreation ground holding some 50 unfamiliar vehicles.

Only after being exposed did Kent Police concede to

having received “non-emergency information” which was “not fully assessed.”

The fascists made clear from the outset that theirs would be a major operation hitting the south coast. As they besieged Dover, Sky News even carried a prominent September 6 video report describing the black-clad men as “storming” Dover and citing Thomas’ warnings in the video’s title that it was “only the beginning”.

The campaign intensified into Tuesday and Wednesday. Names, addresses and photographs of RNLI crew were circulated online by far-right activists. RNLI volunteers were branded “collaborators” and “traitors” and the charity denounced as a migrant “taxi service.” On Wednesday, around 60 anti-immigration protesters gathered outside the RNLI headquarters in Poole, Dorset, to protest its involvement in rescuing migrants in the English Channel.

In this, the fascists echoed Suella Braverman, a former Tory Home Secretary who defected to Reform and whose constituency borders Portsmouth. Speaking to GB News, Braverman backed the refusal of the ports to accept the lifeboat with migrants on board, denouncing the RNLI as a “taxi service,” for migrants, and declaring Hampshire to be “the heart of the invasion”. She called for “every port” to refuse such RNLI boats entry and “every single boat” to be turned back to France.

On Tuesday evening up to 50 masked fascists besieged the Marriott hotel in Cosham, Portsmouth, claiming they had discovered the whereabouts of coachloads of asylum seekers. The occupants were in fact Pakistan’s touring under-19 cricket squad, who had arrived on a coach from the firm that transported the rescued migrants days earlier.

Reform has coupled opposition to the “disruption” caused by the fascists with open solidarity with their aims. The relationship between the two was made clear by Reform’s Hampshire group leader George Madgwick being able to disperse the crowd within minutes once it was clear the cricket team was under siege. Madgwick then brushed off the events as “reflective of the climate we live in.”

Within a day, Reform home affairs spokesman, Zia Yusuf, travelled to Portsmouth to declare his sympathy with the cause of the participants and to denounce Labour Prime Minister Andy Burnham for “directly inciting disorder”, During his visit, Yusef and Thomas had a polite exchange filmed by Sky News.

The RNLI have explained that they are bound by the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea and Safety of Life at Sea to rescue vessels in distress, when tasked by the coastguard. Challenging the grounds cited by the Associated British Ports that permission at Southampton was declined for want of “reception facilities”, the RNLI

answered that disembarkation is part of that obligation, not a discretionary extra.

There is no innocent explanation for the RNLI being barred, and the event points to complicity at the highest levels. King’s Harbour Master (KHM) Portsmouth is under Royal Navy command; and every vessel bound for Portsmouth International Port requires Navy permission to transit the waters it controls. In response to enquiries KHM declined to comment on “operational matters,” with Sky News reporting that the Ministry of Defence likewise refused.

Refusing entry to ships carrying rescued migrants is part of an international trend. In November 2022, Giorgia Meloni’s far-right Italian government rejected 43 successive requests from the *Ocean Viking* to dock, stranding 230 people, 55 of them children, for three weeks in open violation of maritime law. The boat was illegally refused entry into multiple European ports, despite many on board being ill, some critically. It was finally allowed to dock in Toulon, France.

The practice has spread to the UK, along with far-right mobs, because their politics is being legitimised by the governing Labour and opposition parties. Burnham, as he secured the nominations in July required to become Labour leader, demonstrated his right-wing credentials to by backing further brutal anti-immigration measures contained in Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood’s Immigration and Asylum Bill.

This followed his election campaign statement: “I do agree with what [Reform UK leader Nigel] Farage is saying. What we’ve got to do is get back to a sense of order.” This required a “greater use of detention so that people who have got no basis for a claim are not actually admitted into the country.”



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