Refugees and family members oppose Labour government’s dismantling of rights for asylum seekers

By our reporter
22 November 2026

The WSWS has interviewed refugees and their families who have spoken out against the sweeping attacks on the right to asylum by the Labour government, contained in the plans for “Earned Settlement” announced by Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood on November 2.

Those who arrive by “small boats” are now faced with a 30-year wait before they can apply for settlement. This punitive measure has been combined with a dragnet against refugees already in the UK, placing their status and future in jeopardy. Those who claimed asylum before March 2, 2026, and did not arrive via routes designated by the government “safe” and “legal”, face being transferred into a new “Core Protection” system.

The Orwellian title conceals a harsh reality. Those placed under the system will receive only temporary permission to remain, reviewed every 30 months, with the threat of deportation hanging over them if the Home Office determines that they no longer require protection. The normal qualifying period for settlement will be 20 years.

The imposition of these changes retrospectively appeared only in footnote in the 62-page document published by the Home Office “A Fairer Pathway to Settlement.”: “Those refugees, not on Safe and Legal routes, who claimed asylum before 2 March 2026 will move to Core Protection.”

The Refugee Council has warned that approximately 200,000 people could be affected. This includes people who have already been granted refugee status and were previously entitled to apply for settlement after five years. Although time already spent with refugee status will count towards settlement, they face prolonged uncertainty and potentially decades of waiting before they can secure permanent settlement.

The two interviews—with an asylum seeker and a partner of a refugee—appear under false names. They are an appeal to the working class against the Burnham government’s hostile environment. The union leadership has mounted a whitewash, claiming that the “worst aspects” of the assault on migrants have been halted through a limited reprieve for a small section of care workers, while offering no defence of other migrants or refugees.

The attack on migrants and refugees is an attack on the entire working class. Their defence is essential for the class unity needed to fight for decent paying jobs and funding public services against the real drain on society—the super-rich monopolising an increasing share of the wealth produced by workers of every nationality.

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Michael: In March this year, the government reassured existing refugees that we would not be affected by the new rules, but now things are presented differently and this is not given enough public attention.

We came here seeking protection from danger. Many spent 10, 15 or even 20 years waiting. We finally thought we could rebuild our lives, but now our future is uncertain again. This is not just paperwork. It is about families, children and lives already affected by years of waiting.

I came to the UK in 2007 and claimed asylum. My appeal was finally allowed by the court in February 2020, but the Home Office did not issue my BRP [Biometric Residence Permit] and refugee status until June 2022.

I applied for ILR [Indefinite Leave to Remain] in July 2025 but was refused because the Home Office counted my five years from June 2022. I was told to apply again in 2027.

I have spent almost 20 years waiting for decisions, documents and security. I cannot get those lost years back. I feel my life has been on hold for far too long.

I expected to apply for ILR in 2027 and believed my family was finally approaching a secure future. But only a few months later, we were left questioning whether those assurances would be honoured. I felt devastated.

I came here in my 30s and am now in my 50s. Another 20 years of waiting could mean reaching my 70s without settlement. How much more of our lives must we sacrifice?

We cannot confidently plan our children’s education, our home or our future. We constantly worry that the rules could change again. After years of trying to build a normal family life, we still cannot feel secure.

All three of our children were born in the UK, and two are British citizens. This is their home. Their schools, friends and future are here.

They have done nothing wrong. As parents, we want them to grow up feeling secure, not worrying about their parents’ immigration status. It breaks my heart that I cannot give them the certainty they deserve.

I have faced serious health problems, including cancer. I am on

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lifelong medication and attend regular cancer follow-up appointments. Even during chemotherapy, I continued working. The uncertainty has also made my mental health worse.

People who were given five years' permission could now face a much longer settlement pathway. Some are only months away from applying for ILR after years of waiting.

If one government gives reassurance and then leaves people questioning it a few months later, what protection do we have when another government comes along? Can our lives be turned into a political game every time the government changes its plans? We are human beings, not political bargaining chips.

Many are frightened about their children's futures, health and settlement. Some have British children or serious health conditions; others waited 15 or 20 years for asylum decisions.

Behind every case is a real family. I am bringing people together because existing refugees deserve to be heard, not forgotten. We are human beings, not immigration numbers. We want to work, raise our children and rebuild our lives.

We trusted the [Starmer Labour] government's March reassurance that existing refugees would not be affected. Now we are questioning whether those words mean anything. We have already spent years waiting for safety. How much more of our lives must we sacrifice before we can finally live in peace?"

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Susan: I am a British UK citizen my partner is a refugee from Iran who came to this country 19 years ago. He only achieved refugee status in May and now this is placed in jeopardy by the Labour Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood's retrospectively changes to the rules for asylum seekers who did not arrive by a "safe" and "legal" route.

My partner's application for refugee status was originally declined when he came in 2007. This was on the grounds it lacked "credibility" and that he had not provided documents to prove that he would be persecuted. It was only because I took up an appeal at great financial expense and realised that not all grounds and documents had been fully considered that we were eventually successful. The application was subsequently granted on the original grounds—19 years of his life lost due to failings of the system.

Those who flee persecution do not have the luxury of applying for asylum via the countries listed by the Home Office. They cannot travel with a passport, are traumatised and cannot simply provide documents on entry. We finally thought when his refugee status was accepted there was light at the end of the tunnel. With the changes announced now for a 30 year wait for those who arrived outside of legal routes, my partner would be in his eighties before he qualifies for permanent residency. This is unachievable and will further destabilise and separate communities.

I believe the government is in breach of Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on Refugees. This states that you cannot penalise people for the route they take for claiming asylum—including illegal entry—as it recognised that many do not have another option.

There is too much dehumanising of refugees in the media and a lot of stories about how they claim generous benefits. This breeds resentment and people need to be educated about the reality as they would respond differently. Many asylum seekers dream of being able to work but are not allowed by the government.

After my partner was originally declined refugee status he was left in limbo for 19 years. He had to report to the Home Office on a regular basis, was not advised on how to appeal and received no state support. He was reliant solely on the generosity of the local community, charities, and the church for a roof over his head and food. He spent nearly two decades sleeping on a sofa. He tried to repay people through all kinds of voluntary work as he is very skilled.

My partner has described this period as like living in an "open prison". You can see the sky, but you are denied every opportunity to get a job, rent a house, open a bank account or even drive a car.

I come from a working-class family and have worked my entire life and have always voted Labour. I believed them to be the party that was beside the workers and most vulnerable like refugees. I will not be voting for them anymore. They are imitating [far right] Reform UK—their proposals are unfair, inhumane and attacking the most vulnerable.

I've seen that migrants who earn £125,000 will be fast tracked for Indefinite Leave to Remain after three years. This is discrimination. Those in a higher wage group are valued more by the government, even though you could be contributing equally while on a lower wage. For example, construction workers would not meet that threshold. They build our houses. Don't we need them? There is catering, hospitality, transport, farming those working in warehouses for low pay, the list is endless. The wealthy find ways to pay little tax but obviously those in 9 to 5 jobs can't do this but they keep the system rolling.

Yes, we value our doctors and nurses, but we appreciate everyone's contribution. There should not a division between skilled workers, other migrants and refugees, they all deserve to be treated fairly and humanely, not made out to be a burden on society.

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