

# Committee to Defend Asylum Seekers

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## NEWSLETTER No.5

### Home secretary David Blunkett to reconsider vouchers

The Guardian on Saturday 28 July reported that home secretary David Blunkett is considering scrapping the voucher scheme. On the face of it, the report is good news, and shows the government is having to respond to the pressure which the CDAS and a host of other organisations and trade unions have been mounting over this barbaric system.

Blunkett is also reported to be considering allowing some asylum seekers – those with skills in demand – to work as soon as they arrive in the country

But the Guardian's report made clear the alternatives to the voucher system being looked at are cashless, thus continuing the racist basis of the voucher system that asylum seekers cannot be trusted with cash benefits.

The report also said Blunkett is pursuing a “tough 'n tender” policy toward asylum seekers, the tough part being an escalation in the number being locked up and deported.

In other words, the campaigns to defend asylum seekers must step up their efforts, particularly in the run up to the Labour Party conference in late September.

### 60,000 march in Genoa in defence of asylum seekers

Reports from the demonstration against the G8 summit in Genoa have focussed on the violence of the police and the tragic killing of a 23-year-old Italian demonstrator.

Yet the three days of demonstrations and protests brought together some 300,000 people in magnificent display of disciplined anger against the ravages of the system which the G8 leaders are determined to defend.

And in all of the protests, the issue of asylum seekers and the treatment they are suffering across the world was taken up, and particularly on the first day when up to 60,000 people – twice the number the organisers expected – demonstrated in defence of asylum seekers and against the “get tough” policies of the G8 governments.

### Defend the Human Right to Life and the Right to Protest

On the 17 April, Mike Taylor, Bristol Treasurer of the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), was convicted by a London Court of organising a demonstration at Heathrow Airport to stop the deportation flight to Iraq of Amanj Gafor, a mentally-ill Kurdish refugee. The NUJ is now

calling for support to publicise Mike's appeal and re-trial.

Mike's reply to the court was "I refuse to be criminalised for saving somebody's life. We will engage in civil disobedience until you are forced to recognize the human right to asylum and our human right to defend it".

Within 48 hours of hearing about the threat to Amanj's life, the AEEU shop stewards committee at the gigantic Rolls Royce aircraft engine factory in Bristol adopted him and started to lobby the UK Home Office. Almost immediately, five trade unions and four MPs joined the lobby forcing the government to review the case in the High Court.

Within a week of Amanj's appeal being turned down at the High Court, BA pilots and air traffic control workers in the IPMS union were refusing to cooperate with the deportation, activists were boarding planes, passengers were refusing to sit down and multinational airlines like Lufthansa were pulling out.

One year on, the struggle continues to grow. Tony Benn has sent a letter out to the unions calling for support. The airport protests have drawn support from people from all walks of life. Workers, commuters and backpackers took a stand together, engaging in civil disobedience on board the flights - literally standing up for human rights. This has scared the authorities. They want to make an example, which is why they tried to paint Mike a terrorist. But this trial isn't just about an individual. This trial is about everyone's right to unite and protest in defence of asylum seekers and human rights.

Demonstrators picketed the first day of the trial at Isleworth Crown Court on Friday 27 July 2001 to challenge Europe's racist immigration laws and the hypocrisy of western governments that bomb and sanction impoverished nations forcing people to wander the world for a safe home and their share of its wealth.

Unfortunately, one of the police witnesses refused at the last minute to give evidence and the hearing was postponed until 24 Augusts at 10.15pm. Of course, rather than allow the trial to go ahead, it was cancelled in favour of giving the prosecution time to regroup.

In the meantime, however, the TGWU and the NUJ have passed motions through their NECs backing Mike Taylor's appeal. Both Bill Morris and John Foster, general secretaries of the TGWU and NUJ respectively, have offered full support for the trial. The campaign is calling on them to send delegates to the 24 August lobby. As the trial is now in the Crown Court, the points of European Law (Human Rights Act 2000) and the Geneva Convention will be properly heard and addressed as points of law.

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## **Inhuman detention centres shame New Labour**

The New Labour government has embarked on a programme of swiftly expanding the number of asylum applicants in detention, both in purpose-built facilities and actual prisons. In early July there were 1,787 asylum detainees across Britain. Over the course of this year some 9,000 asylum seekers will spend at least a week in detention; hundreds will spend months on end.

Nearly three times as many are currently in prisons as in detention centres, simply for the "crime" of having sought refugee status in Britain. Many of these men and women face the same conditions as remand prisoners and convicted criminals, spending up to 23 hours a day in cells. The government has commissioned the expansion of old and construction of new facilities. The summer has already seen the opening of the much enlarged Harmondsworth facility near Heathrow airport with 550 beds reported in the last Newsletter.

The biggest detention camp of all looks set to open in late August at Yarlswood on the outskirts of Bedford. Group 4, the corporation that operates the Campsfield facility, has the Home Office contract to run Yarlswood with a capacity of 900 beds. It appears that the bulk of newly arrived refugees shipped to the former military barracks at Oakington in Cambridgeshire will go on to the Yarlswood centre - generally on a fast track to deportation.

CDAS opposes the policy of detention in principle and campaigns for the closure of each and every one of the purpose-built facilities and the immediate release of all asylum detainees, wherever they are currently held. We are pleased to work with campaigners who have been active in opposition to Campsfield, Harmondsworth, Haslar and other such lock-ups.

## **National dispersal system is a disgrace**

Lin Harwood North East Campaign for Asylum writes:

The national dispersal scheme for asylum seekers in 'housing led'; people are dispersed to places where there is a surfeit of housing. Where there is a surfeit of housing, there is a dearth of jobs and much poverty and deprivation.

Here in the North East much of the accommodation asylum seekers are forced to live in is bleak, poorly equipped, badly furnished and would otherwise be empty. Interpreting services are woefully inadequate. Solicitors experienced in immigration law are swamped with work and some asylum seekers are unable to get adequate legal representation when preparing their case.

Health education and social service workers have inadequate training and resources for meeting the needs of asylum seekers. The voucher scheme is stigmatising and asylum seekers are receiving only 70% income support.

The poverty, hardship and marginalisation experienced by asylum seekers in the UK is a disgrace. Asylum seekers are being harassed at home, in the street, in college and at school. Racist violence is commonplace in their lives. The Home Office is not a benevolent agency seeking to help those fleeing war, torture, rape and death.

We must campaign to end forced dispersal and the voucher scheme, challenge racist rhetoric about asylum seekers and ensure that we do not fall into the trap of thinking dispersal is working because those who are running dispersal schemes say so.

## **Local Action – News from Haringey's Campaign**

Refugees in Haringey are under attack. Police and immigration officers are breaking down doors and taking men, women and children to detention centres from where they are being sent back to war zones. This government plans to deport 30,000 asylum seekers each year for the next three

years.

Our friends, neighbours and classmates are under threat. Asylum seekers, their friends, supporters, teachers and students from the College of North East London have come together to defend human rights and the mixed community which makes Haringey so special.

Activities so far...

On 22 June we lobbied David Lammy MP on behalf of Alketa Hoti, an asylum seeker from Kosova whose husband had been detained and who was due to be deported with her son, Ernie, a pupil at North Haringey Infant School. Mr Lammy helped delay the deportation for 6 months, but the family have still not been granted asylum.

On 23 June we protested outside Barbara Roche's surgery in Wood Green. 80 people, including children from North Haringey School, demanded an end to deportations.

On 4 July we had a public meeting in Tottenham Green Centre. Alketa Hoti and Besnik Gashi talked about their experiences in the war in Kosova, and why they cannot return.

On 7 July more than 200 people marched from Manor House to Wood Green. Asylum seekers from Kosova, Turkey, Colombia, Somalia, Iran, Iraq, and elsewhere came together with local people demanding No Deportations! No Detentions! No dispersal!

On 17 July we had a meeting to discuss the campaign and what to do next...

*Future Activities...*

These are just some of the activities that we plan. We need your help and ideas:

Wednesday 1 August, 7.30pm - How to campaign for individual asylum seekers: meeting to get informed about the legal process and discuss what can be done to help.

Saturday 11 August, 11am - Picket of Tesco's, Seven Sisters, as part of a national day of action against vouchers - join us to demand 'Cash not vouchers!'

Thursday 23 August, 7.30pm - Campaign Meeting. Everybody is welcome.

We have people who can translate Albanian, Turkish and Spanish and but we need more!

Tuesday 25 September 7.30pm - Public Meeting Against Deportations.

30 September - Lobby of Labour Party Conference - transport from Haringey.

All meetings at Wood Green Labour Club, Stuart Crescent N22 (opposite 00Civic Centre)

For more info contact Jenny (0795 112 2104) Simon (020 8292 2307)

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## **Desperation leads to death in Spain**

Spanish police on Sunday found the bodies of six north African men washed up on beaches and arrested more than 130 illegal immigrants in southern Spain.

The immigrants were found after land and sea searches along Spain's southern Atlantic coast, police said in a statement. Alerted by a member of the public, rescue services found two bodies inside a boat washed up on a beach. Another four were discovered on rocks close to where police had earlier intercepted 45 immigrants, one of three groups found.

Spanish media reported that more than 300 immigrants had been seized along the same stretch of coast between Friday and Saturday.

The warm summer months encourage more immigrants to attempt to cross the often-treacherous Straits of Gibraltar, the narrowest stretch of water between Spain and Morocco. The vast majority of immigrants trying to enter Spain leave from Morocco.

Last year about 15,000 African immigrants tried to enter Spain and scores drowned in the attempt, official figures show.

In January, Spain brought in a controversial new law to tighten immigration controls in a bid to deter more people from entering the country without a visa.

In the six months to the end of June, Spanish authorities expelled more than 5,000 illegal Moroccan immigrants, according to official figures.

## **African migrants in limbo on Turkey-Greek border**

The ultimate test of a government's commitment to human rights is the practices and attitudes of its agents towards immigrants and refugees as well as the level of the protection of human rights aliens.

On 14 July, approximately 205 African immigrants and refugees, detained at various points only on racial criteria in Istanbul on 7 July, were dumped on the border line between Turkey and Greece. Turkish police have been forcing them into the Greek side, while the Greek police have been forcing them back into the Turkish side. It is alleged that three of them died, two of them have been raped, and the others are starving. They may be facing imminent death and other dangers to their safety.

1. The only criterion in this detention was the colour of the persons. They were not questioned about leaving their countries and staying in Turkey; neither were they questioned on their legal status in Turkey. There were no charges that they were "illegal immigrants".
2. The detention conditions were inhuman, with no food, clean water and sanitation. The sick were not provided with medical assistance. They were kept in crowded narrow cells for at least seven days.
3. The detainees were forced to sign statements in Turkish saying they entered Turkey from Greece and that they wanted to go back to Greece. It is reported that seven are still under detention as they did not sign.
4. It is reported that 205 African immigrants and refugees were taken to Ipsala district at the Turkish-Greek border, and left there without food and water. They were forced to run into Greece and warned they would be shot if they turned back. They were not admitted to the Greek side, and detained in Greece for a day before being forced back into Turkey. Some of them are still on the border.

## **Join the CDAS committee**

We meet fortnightly on Mondays at Camden Town Hall.

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