

***A Short History of Resistance to  
Immigration Detention and  
Deportations  
in the United Kingdom***

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In 2019, 'enforced returns' from the UK fell to 7,361, 22% lower than the previous year and the lowest number since records began in 2004. Over the same period, there were 11,421 'voluntary' departures.

On 31 December 2019, there were 1,637 people in immigration detention, 8% fewer than on 31 December 2018, and fewer than half the number on 30 September 2017. The number of people entering detention in 2019 was similar to the previous year at 24,443. Prior to this, there has been a downward trend since 2015. (*Immigration Statistics, Year Ending December 2019*)

In July 2016, the Conservative government had announced a new policy: to detain fewer people for shorter periods and to investigate alternatives to detention. Between 2015 and 2018, the number of principal detention centre places<sup>i</sup> in the UK fell from around 3,700 to around 2,700. Four of the 11 main detention centres closed. There is a small number of pilot 'alternatives to detention' schemes. A July 2019 government statement summarised the changes. They surprised many people, not least because other government policies, including those dealing with migrants, have not become more benign in the same period.

What preceded and may have helped bring about this improvement? I would argue that it has been opposition, led by people in detention and people faced with deportation, and spreading further and further into society as the ill effects of detention and deportation have affected more and more people. This opposition has become increasingly coherent, from grass roots to parliamentary levels, and exercised considerable pressure on government.

## **Detention and deportation, two sides of one weapon**

The legislative background to the United Kingdom governments' powers to detain and deport go back to the Aliens Act of 1905, which targeted Jewish migrants. Subsequent key laws were Commonwealth Citizens Acts in the 1960s and the 1971 Immigration Act. Previously, British Commonwealth citizens from the West Indies, Africa, and South Asia could, in theory at least, come to the UK. The new restrictive legislation introduced a UK ancestry visa with a 'patrial' clause: to be eligible an applicant had to have one grandparent born in the UK. Other visas were much more difficult to obtain. The 1971 Act strengthened powers to detain and deport migrants. Today every government has its ever more restrictive new Immigration Act.

New Labour governments (1997-2011) increased the number of immigration detention places more than tenfold. The Conservatives (2011- ) ramped up the 'hostile environment'<sup>ii</sup> for undocumented migrants: 'Go Home' vans touring the cities, raids on communities, deportation of many of the Windrush Generation<sup>iii</sup> to the West Indies, and an attempt to turn landlords, doctors and nurses, teachers and landlords into immigration agents charged with reporting undocumented migrants.

## **Resistance to deportation from the 1970s to early 2000s**

In the 1970s and 1980s, struggles against the new restrictions focused on the fight to remain in Britain. This altered somewhat in the 1990s with the growth of detention and of opposition to it. Recent years have seen direct actions against deportation charter flights.

In response to government and right-wing street attacks on migrant rights, in 1967 the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants was established at a meeting at the Dominion Cinema in Southall, west London. The venue reflected the fact that Southall was a centre of resistance to the violent racism of the far right and police, with many south Asians. Groups such as the Southall Black Sisters and Southall (Police) Monitoring Group were active from the late 1970s. Similar groups grew in many other towns. All these, together with local solidarity groups, fed naturally into support for individual campaigns against deportation in the local community.

There were many such individual anti deportation campaigns. By their nature affecting individuals or single families, they were initially fragmented. The Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit (GMIAU) reported that between 1978 and 1986, 36 anti deportation campaigns in the area had been successful. Such campaigns would include both legal support for the case being put to government, but also public-facing work including approaching local faith groups, trade unions, councillors and members of parliament, perhaps with leaflets and a petition.

During the 1990s, there were increased moves to link up individual anti deportation campaigns. The West Midlands Anti Deportation Campaign, centred in Birmingham, led on to the establishment of the National Coalition of Anti Deportation Campaigns, which played a major role from 1993. The NCADC evolved into the present-day organisation Right To Remain, which has a Toolkit to help those facing deportation which you can find on its website.

In the 1980s and 1990s there were many campaigns in which trade unions gave strong support to members threatened with deportation. Well-known ones include Mohammed Idrish of the local government union Nalgo, Abdul Onibiyo of public sector Unison and Ragbir Singh of the journalists' NUJ. Organisations such as the Indian Workers Association were also involved. The International Federation of Iraqi Refugees demonstrated against deportation flights from RAF Brize Norton. And former detainees continue to speak out fearlessly.

In the 1990s the human rights groups Liberty and Amnesty International UK published highly critical reports on deportation and detention. Fewer were published as the detention estate expanded under New Labour. However, both organisations picked up the issue with vigour from around the mid-2010s.

## **Resistance to immigration detention**

Some of the focus of resistance shifted to detention. Until 1993, there were fewer than 200 immigration detention places, mostly in huts at Harmondsworth by Heathrow airport. However, under Conservative and particularly New Labour governments the 'detention estate', was expanded over the next 20 years to some 3700 places.

First up was Campsfield, a 'state of the art facility' that opened near Oxford in November 1993. Campsfield was run by the private company Group Four, setting a pattern for most of the big centres that were to open. This account dwells on Campsfield because the author was involved in the campaign there and because Campsfield rapidly became a principal centre of struggle against detention.

In the spring of 1994 occurred the first of many mass hunger strikes, together with a roof-top protest. Ten hunger strikers were released. Hunger strikes were often accompanied by statements or manifestos which greatly increased knowledge of what was going on. Protesters also telephoned radio stations and their letters and manifestos addressed government ministers direct. Some hunger strikes were led by people from particular countries, Ivory Coast in the early 1990s for example or, in the mid 2010s, South Sudanese. This resistance, and the solidarity among detainees that powered it, gained publicity and inspired resistance outside the detention centre.

A 'Campsfield Forum' operated for a year before Campsfield opened, and developed into two groups, Asylum Welcome and Detainee Support, and the Campaign to Close Campsfield. The campaign demonstrated monthly 300 times before Campsfield closed in November 2018. A key aspect of these demos was that they provided a regular meeting of activists from different parts of Britain, indeed of the world, and contact was made, via display of banners, shouts and music (best, drums!) with those detained inside, who were heartened by the support. The campaign published two editions of *Voices from Detention* (the current online equivalent is Detained Voices). Supported by Oxford Trades Union Council, of which the author was president at the time, the campaign secured the backing of five national trade unions for an end to detention. Hundreds of Oxford academics signed public letters, and elected local councils called for an end to detention. The campaign worked with FASTI in France, and in 2000 organised a Barbed Wire Europe conference against immigration detention attended by over 120 people from 46 organisations and nine countries. It later joined the anti-detention network Migreurop.

The campaign developed an automatic response to news of a hunger strike or other protest inside: a candle-lit vigil at 6pm at the centre, visible to detainees, and sometimes another vigil in Oxford, accompanied by a press release.

On several occasions mass hunger strikes spread from one centre to others. On a number of occasions people freed themselves by scaling the razor wire fences or breaking down gates. There were major protests, sometimes involving fire, at Campsfield, Yarl's Wood, Harmondsworth and Haslar. In 2002, half of Yarl's Wood, Europe's largest detention centre at the time, was burned down. (Unconcerned for the safety of detainees, the government and Group 4 had ignored Fire Service advice and failed to fit sprinklers.)

The state responded with show trials: the Campsfield Nine in 1998 at Oxford Crown Court, the Yarl's Wood 13 in 2003 at Harrow Crown Court, and the Harmondsworth Three in 2005 at Southwark Crown Court. The campaigns in support of the defendants - charged variously with riot and arson - and the subsequent failure of these prosecutions were major victories.

At Campsfield, on a number of occasions there were 'human rights camps' in front of the detention centre, for periods from days to weeks; one camp had a newsletter called the *Campsfield Kettle*. There were other unusual actions. A woman invited the press to observe her digging an escape tunnel into Campsfield. In March 1994, during a hunger strike, several demonstrators

climbed into Campsfield and one woman spent the night on the roof of the main block. She later spent a week in Holloway Prison for scratching 'Close Campsfield' onto the main gates (the inscription can still be read). As well as street stalls, and speaking to school children, campaigners including Kurdish musicians and dancers have done street theatre. One Christmas, campaigners erected a 'detention centre fence' complete with razor wire and cameras outside the country cottage home of the then Labour Home Secretary, Jack Straw.

There is a Visitors Group at each detention centre, and a national Association of Visitors to Immigration Detainees. The most prominent of these, covering the Heathrow detention centres, developed into Detention Action, which supports Freed Voices, a group of 'experts by experience'. There are efforts at joint and cultural, artistic and religious/spiritual activity. Music In Detention links up local school children and youth groups with people in detention centres to make music together online. Journalists are excluded from detention centres (the National Union of Journalists campaigns for access). An early inside report from Campsfield came from an *Independent* reporter who managed to get in as the roadie for the local band the Zimmermen, who did a gig for the detainees.

In the mid 1990s, together with the Campaign Against Racism and Fascism based at the Institute of Race Relations in London, the Close Campsfield campaign set an Anti Detention Network. In 2001, the campaign initiated the Barbed Wire Britain Network to End Refugee and Migrant Detention, active for some 15 years from 2002. BWB helped to organise campaigns and demos at detention centres, called the only UK demonstration against the European Union's Returns Directive of 2008 (which 'allowed' detention up to 18 months), organised meetings in Parliament with MPs, and jointly organised a national demo in London with the NCADC and the Campaign to Defend Asylum Seekers which had several years of activity in the early 2000s. From the late 1990s, when others lobbied New Labour behind closed doors, the National Assembly Against Racism led vociferous public campaigns for migrant rights.

A very much larger demonstration was organised by Citizens UK in support of a 'Strangers Into Citizens' campaign for an amnesty. In May 2009 some 15,000 people demonstrated in London, including many undocumented migrants. Estimates at the time suggested that the proposed scheme would regularise 450,000 of the UK's 750,000 undocumented migrants. The scheme was endorsed by the then mayor of London, the Conservative Boris Johnson, but pooh-poohed by the Labour government.

Appalled by what it observed in bail hearings at the Immigration and Asylum Tribunal, the Close Campsfield campaign created the Bail Observation Project, which published two devastating reports on this the travesty of justice, based on observations of 330 hearings. BOP currently trains law students to continue this work.

Similar concerns led to the creation of the organisation Bail for Immigration Detainees (BID) which continues to secure the release of people detained and to lobby the authorities. The Immigration Law Practitioners Association is a major critic.

Government plans to open a massive new detention centre at Bicester in Oxfordshire, and to double the size of Campsfield were defeated by building broad-based campaigns including some local councillors, *pro bono* legal support, and local members of parliament, negotiating the local authority planning process and involving one lengthy Public Inquiry.

In the 1990s and early 2000s there were local closure campaigns at the Harmondsworth (Heathrow), Haslar (Portsmouth) and Dover detention centres. In the early 2000s there was a powerful campaign Stop Arbitrary Detention at Yarl's Wood (SADY) in Bedfordshire. Then from the 2010s, Movement For Justice organised demonstrations of unprecedented size, up to 1000 people, at Harmondsworth/Colnbrook and particularly at Yarl's Wood. These featured coach transport from other parts of the UK organised online and live amplified phone conversations between people detained inside the centre and demonstrators outside the fence. South Yorkshire Migrant and Asylum Action Group initiated the current series of demonstrations at Morton Hall detention centre (Lincolnshire).

Yarl's Wood is the main place of detention of women. It sees cooperation between women fighting to remain and organisations including the All Africa Women's Group, School of Oriental and African Studies Detainee Support, Women for Refugee Women (all London) and Women Asylum Seekers Together (Manchester).

There has long been campaigning in Scotland for the closure of Dungavel centre in Ayrshire. In its policy document for the 2014 independence referendum, the governing Scottish National Party called for the closure of Dungavel (detention policy is not devolved to the nations).

One organisation spins out of another. Thus, the co-founder in 2005 of Medical Justice, which provides medical reports for people in detention with a view to securing their release, was also the founder of SADY and had worked for NCADC. No One Is Illegal UK was established in 2003 to campaign for an end to all immigration controls and freedom of movement as a human right. It published a manifesto and pamphlets. In 2011, all 95 of Lush Cosmetics' shops promoted No One Is Illegal UK and distributed its Humanitarian Passport recognising no borders.

No Borders UK, established in 2005, in the next few years set up over 10 groups round the country, organised demonstrations, solidarity and anti-raid and other solidarity actions. London No Borders campaigned against the Gatwick detention centres.

Several Migrant Rights Caravans campaigning against detention and deportation toured the UK in the early 2000s.

A significant development from 2011 was the Detention Forum, a coalition of over 40 groups that pressed for reforms including a 28-day time limit, an end to detention of 'vulnerable' people, proper judicial oversight of detention and, later, community-based alternatives to detention. The Forum lobbied politicians, and in 2015 the All-Party Parliamentary Groups on Refugees and Migration produced a report which proposed the same reforms. This was a very great change, which was accompanied by the first proper parliamentary debates on detention.

Another important development has been These Walls Must Fall, a campaign led by Right To Remain taking the issue into the big cities – 'where people are taken from (the community), rather than where people are taken to (detention centres)' – mainly in the north of England, building community-based campaigns that result in the local city and town councils adopting policy for an end to detention.

An under-cover BBC TV programme in September 2017 about gross abuse of detainees at Brook detention centre near Gatwick airport run by G4S (Gatwick) was a key moment in exposing the detention regime.



## **New forms of resistance to deportations**

Many deportations take place on regular airline flights. Public attention was focused on this when Jimmy Mubenga was killed by Group 4 guards on a British Airways flight to Angola in October 2010. After trial in 2014, in a shocking jury verdict, three G4S guards were found not guilty of his manslaughter.

Apart from the vital last-minute legal moves and interventions by MPs, last-minute on-site interventions had been tried for some years to stop individual deportations. Supporters would go to the airport and try to catch crew members and particularly passengers as they registered for the flight. A leaflet would be used to inform people that a fellow passenger was being deported against their will and might face danger. On a very few occasions a supporter bought a ticket for the flight and once on board stood up and insisted that the person being deported should be taken off the aircraft. Success was rare. But the publicity was adverse, and there have been campaigns to get airlines to stop taking deportees on regular flights. Following one such campaign, Virgin has said it will not take deportees.

Charter deportation flights started in 2001. They offered government an alternative away from the public gaze, and an ability to deport numbers of people on one flight. But direct action campaigners from groups including No Borders and Stop Deportations targeted these. Alerted by detainees that they were being moved out by coach to a deportation flight, on a number of occasions in the 2010s, campaigners arrived in front of the detention centre, laid down at the exit and locked-on arm-to-arm one to another through metal pipes.

For the coaches to leave, the police had to cut through the pipes, which took some time. I am not aware of charter flights being stopped, rather than delayed, in this way, but the deportation machine was disrupted, and the publicity generated strengthened the movement of opposition to deportations. Some such actions happened during 'rolling week of protests' organised by various groups to build momentum: these enabled multiple groups of people to take part in 'low-risk' non-arrestable to 'high-risk' arrestable direct action.

The secretive and brutal deportation regime was dealt a body blow in the night of 28 March 2017 at Stansted airport in Essex. It was delivered by 15 supporters of three groups: End Deportations, Gays and Lesbians Support the Migrants, and climate campaigners in Plane Stupid. In a well-rehearsed operation, they cut through the perimeter fence and locked on round the undercarriage of a Titan Airways aircraft and a scaffold pole tripod they erected behind the wing, thus immobilising the aircraft. The plane was being prepared on the tarmac apron

some distance from the runway for a deportation flight to Nigeria and Ghana. The demonstrators remained in position for 10 hours in the rain, chanting, shouting slogans, and displaying a banner.

Those taking the action knew the stories of some of the people due to be deported on the flight, including a woman whose estranged husband promised to kill her when she returned to Nigeria, a man who lived in the UK for 18 years and was raising his family here, and people who had been trafficked.

Although coaches with the 70 deportees set out, they turned away from the airport. All flights were halted for 80 minutes. The charter flight was stopped. Months later, 11 of the 70 deportees were still in the country fighting their cases.

The 15 were arrested and charged with aggravated trespass. This carries a penalty of fine or up to three months prison. The government obviously decided to set an example and added charges under the anti-terrorism Aviation and Maritime Security Act passed following the Lockerbie bombing in 1988; it provides for penalties including imprisonment for life.

The serious charges reflected the effectiveness of the challenge to the whole anti migrant hostile environment policy. The 15 defendants received unprecedented support for their direct action that had brought practical solidarity to individuals and illuminated a brutal regime once and for all.

There were many delays and false starts to the trial at Chelmsford Crown Court. On 10 December 2018 the 15 were found guilty by the jury. The following day over 1,000 people demonstrated in their support outside the Home Office in London. The threat of prison hung over them for two months, until they all received non-custodial community service sentences (three of these were suspended nine-month prison sentences).

Given that the judge instructed the jury to ignore the motives of the accused, a guilty verdict was not a surprise. But, in sentencing, he took their motives into account, or ran scared of public reaction to prison sentences. Grounds for appeal against the guilty verdict were lodged on 11 January 2019. No hearing date has been set.

Other actions have targeted coach firms that transport deportees from detention centre to airport. Climate activists Reclaim The Power are doing this; RtP devoted their 2019 summer camp to the theme of migrants' rights.

Community-based actions against deportations continue. Famous are the Glasgow Girls, seven school students who hit the headlines in 2005 when they confronted politicians about their ill-treatment of refugees. Based on the events, the 2014 film *Glasgow Girls* tells how with their teacher they stopped the deportation of a fellow student, a 15-year-old Kosovan Roma refugee, and her mother.

There has been some resistance to UK Border Force raids on housing estates, shops, restaurants, Underground, rail and coach stations. The Anti Raids Network seeks to spread information about ways to oppose immigration raids, including migrants' rights not to be bullied by Border Force guards.

Press coverage, notably in the *Guardian*, from early 2018 exposed the 'Windrush scandal': thousands of people of West Caribbean-origin people legally resident in the country had been criminalised by the Home Office. Many lost their jobs, were deported and had their lives destroyed. The Home Secretary resigned. Apologies and compensation were offered (but little was delivered). But the political landscape was transformed and the 'hostile environment' challenged.

There appears to have been some reduction in deportations by charter flight. 1,536 people were deported on charter flights in 2016. Government figures for the final quarter of 2019 show 35 men and 2 women were deported on three flights to four countries (France, Germany, Switzerland and Kosovo) with 172 guards at a cost £443,000. In the second half of the year 83 people were deported on seven flights to six countries with 375 guards at a cost of close on £1 million. See Corporate Watch for more information.

Several successful legal challenges in the past year or so bear on deportations. It is no longer legal for police to pick up destitute migrants in the streets in order for them to be deported. And deporting people while they have an appeal outstanding is no longer legal either.

A topic for which there is not space here is the degree to which workers in the welfare state, health services, schools and universities, and landlords have refused to carry out legally required checks on the immigration status of individuals. See the Docs Not Cops website.

## Prospects

New forms of resistance are devised, new campaigns are set up, there is a new All-Party Parliamentary Group on Immigration Detention. For the past four years the Labour Party had been lucky enough to have a leader, Jeremy Corbyn, who has always campaigned for all detention to end. Last October's Labour Party Conference carried a motion calling for the closure of all detention centres. Some powerful recent actions have brought together Anti-deportation/detention, climate activists and gay and lesbian rights groups: the way to go.<sup>iv</sup>

It remains to be if the hardline Home Secretary Priti Patel in Boris Johnson's newly re-elected government will try to reverse the reduction in the 'detention estate'. At the time of writing, following releases during the Covid-19 pandemic, only some 700 immigration detainees remain in detention centres and prisons, some 350 in each. Detainees and others are demanding the closure of all centres. An amendment to the current Immigration Bill requires a 28 day time limit but also that persons detained must be brought before a judge every 3 days.

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*This account was commissioned by Gisti (Groupe d'information et de soutien des immigrés) in Paris, in whose magazine Plein droit it was published in June 2020.<sup>v</sup> A version with links to organisations etc. mentioned in the text is at: <http://oaid.org.uk>*

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<sup>i</sup> The figures for numbers detained include 300-400 people held under immigration law in ordinary prisons. In addition to the main detention centres there are about 80 places in short-term holding facilities, mainly at airports.

<sup>ii</sup> The phrase 'hostile environment', as something desirable to create for undocumented migrants, was first used in public in 2007 by Liam Byrne, Labour immigration minister, and repeated by Alan Johnson, Labour home secretary, then by the Conservative home secretary then prime minister Theresa May and Amber Rudd, home secretary.

<sup>iii</sup> Wikipedia: 'Those arriving in the UK between 1948 and 1971 from Caribbean countries. The ship *Empire Windrush* arrived at Tilbury Docks, Essex, on 22 June 1948, bringing workers from Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago and other islands, as a response to post-war labour shortages in the UK.' The *Guardian's* campaigning reporting, focused on the impact of the 'hostile environment' on people who many years earlier came from the West Indies, really put the Windrush scandal on the map.

<sup>iv</sup> When climate activists joined End Heathrow Immigration Detention in 2019, the group adopted opposition to the expansion of Heathrow airport as a major part of its platform.

<sup>v</sup> <http://gisti.org/spip.php?article6425>

*<http://oaid.org.uk>*