

British government intensifies assault on asylum seekers and migrants

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The British Home Office is accelerating what is dubbed “Operation Oak”, the forced removal of asylum seekers from hotels into longer-term accommodation. A letter, seen by the *Independent*, from the Home Office to private accommodation companies indicates that more asylum seekers are to be moved from hotels into the contractors’ sub-standard accommodation.

Operation Oak, according to the newspaper, involves the “decanting” of asylum seekers from their temporary accommodation into longer term accommodation that will likely involve a general deterioration in their living standards. The choice of the term “decanting” is indicative of the disdain with which asylum seekers are treated. It recalls the thousands of elderly people who were callously “decanted” from hospitals, without being tested, to care homes to die early deaths from COVID-19 at the beginning of the pandemic.

Charities supporting asylum seekers have broadly welcomed the planned move away from hotels, raising concerns over poor conditions and treatment by staff in some. Chief executive at Refugee Action Stephen Hale said, “Getting people out of hotels is a welcome move. Long stays in these rooms have had a terrible impact on the wellbeing of many people in the asylum system.

“But”, he continued, “the Home Office can’t just shunt people from hotel to hovel. All too often we see dispersal accommodation that’s inappropriate, damp and dangerous. Ministers must act quickly and effectively to make sure people are housed in humane and habitable homes that are safe and close to support services and the wider community.”

Last month, the *Guardian* published photos of one such hovel in Derby which showed, “part of the kitchen ceiling missing, rubble in the base of a shower, cracked and missing tiles, rusted pipes and plaster missing from walls where wallpaper has peeled off. The garden is strewn with litter and discarded furniture.”

In July, a report by the National Audit Office found that the Home Office had failed to monitor the contractual

requirements of the three companies awarded the new asylum accommodation contracts to ensure they were delivering an adequate service. The report found both the Home Office and the contractors severely wanting and concluded that vulnerable people’s needs were not being met.

In removing asylum seekers from hotel accommodation, the government is adopting the policies of the right-wing and fascist forces. The right-wing xenophobe Nigel Farage, one of the chief architects of Brexit, has been campaigning for the removal of asylum seekers from supposedly “luxurious” hotel accommodation. His on-location rants about asylum seekers being housed in hotels “at English taxpayers expense” were acted on by the fascist Britain First group who then rampaged through hotels terrorising asylum seekers.

When the *Independent* asked the Home Office what sort of accommodation asylum seekers would be moved to and where this would be located, the government responded in the vaguest manner, saying only that it would move people out of hotels into properties where local authorities had supported procurement.

An incident on February 26 is indicative of the filthy campaign being whipped into a frenzy against asylum seekers. Approximately 30 asylum seekers were deliberately locked out of their accommodation at the Hoylake Hotel on the Wirral, Merseyside after the hotel fire alarm sounded and residents were told to evacuate the premises. Left outside in the cold on the pavement between approximately 4:30pm-9:30pm—with many dressed only in shorts, t-shirts and flip-flops—the asylum seekers were forced to seek shelter for several hours in the local Hoylake Methodist Church.

It emerged that because of a contract dispute between the Hoylake hotel and one of the accommodation contractors, Serco, the hotel sounded the fire alarm and locked the doors once the asylum seekers were outside. Only when the dispute was resolved were the asylum seekers, treated as collateral damage, allowed back in their accommodation.

The kind of accommodation asylum seekers are to be

moved into is typified by the Napier Barracks in Folkestone, a former military garrison. In January, a COVID-19 outbreak swept through the camp with at least 120 asylum seekers contracting the virus. Speaking to Sky News, one former Napier resident told a reporter, "When I first got there, it was like a prison. You could see all the fences and the security guards walking around." He added, "It was really shocking for me. Twenty-eight people were in each block with just two toilets and two showers in a block. Everyone slept close to each other sharing the same air. There were no supplies to clean or take care of our health."

Another resident at the camp during the COVID-19 outbreak said tensions began to build because of the lack of any proper social distancing, with many of those infected sharing the same space as others. "The security officers treated us very badly," he said. "They didn't want to hear from us, and we weren't allowed to speak to anyone in authority. We were so shocked at the state of the barracks and it was this frustration that boiled over."

On January 29, a fire broke out in the barracks, destroying a building and leaving the roughly 300 people housed there without electricity, heating or drinking water. Many of the asylum seekers suffering these conditions were sick with COVID-19. Only a limited number of those falling ill were transferred to hotels.

A High Court in February heard that the government was warned months before the outbreak at the barracks that Napier was "not suitable" for use during a pandemic. The concerns raised by Public Health England focused upon the inappropriateness of the dormitory accommodation which made social distancing impossible. The warning was revealed as six asylum seekers were granted permission to challenge the legality of the Home Office's decision, on the grounds that conditions at Napier breached human rights.

As far back as seven years ago, the barracks was already judged not to "meet acceptable standards of accommodation". However, ministers, including immigration compliance minister Chris Philp and Home Secretary Priti Patel, have insisted that the spartan dormitories are suitable for desperate and often traumatized asylum seekers.

Speaking to Sky News, Majid, who was among those at Napier barracks to contract the deadly disease, said there was very little medical assistance or any general support. Some traumatised residents, many who had made a perilous journey to the UK, were pushed over the edge. "I saw several people attempt suicide and others were self-harming. They were desperate, afraid," said Majid, who added, "We've been treated like criminals and we don't know what we've done to deserve that."

On March 1, Patel intensified the government's assault on

the rights of migrants and asylum seekers by announcing plans to jail for life those deemed "people smugglers". This would increase the sentence dramatically from the present maximum of 14 years in prison. Prime Minister Boris Johnson backed up Patel, saying the government would "absolutely, ruthlessly stiffen the sentences..."

Since August 2020, at least 17 migrants who steered dinghies across the English Channel have been sentenced to terms behind bars ranging from 16 months to at least three years. They will be deported under draconian anti-immigration laws once their sentences are served. This legal outrage breaches the United Nations Refugee Agency definition of smugglers as facilitating journeys for "a financial or other material benefit".

The director for Detention Action Bella Sankey commented, "Priti Patel has been encouraging the prosecution of those who seek asylum themselves, simply for steering their boat to safety, and now she wants to leave those same people at risk of a lifetime in British prison".

The criminalization and sadistic persecution experienced by asylum seekers are a product of the government's long-standing policy to enforce an "hostile atmosphere" for migrants. In the UK, as in every country, immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers are being used as scapegoats to shift the blame for the social ills of the failing capitalist system and test cases for the destruction of democratic rights.

Workers in Britain must come to the defense of all migrants and asylum seekers. The only way to end the wars, environmental destruction and economic ruin that threaten entire populations and force millions from their homes is through the struggle for socialism, encompassing all sections of the international working class.



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