

Twelve refugees drown in Channel due to criminal actions of British and French governments

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The drowning of 12 refugees in the English Channel off the coast of northern France on Tuesday is a direct product of the brutal state crackdown against asylum seekers. The authors of this preventable tragedy sit in government in London and Paris.

A pregnant woman and six children were among the dead. The victims drowned as their inflatable dinghy “ripped open” at around 6:50 a.m. According to the French coastguard, more than 50 people had been rescued with two in critical condition. Only eight life jackets are reported to have been on board the vastly overcrowded dinghy, which sank just three miles off the French coast.

Official reports stated that the victims were primarily from the African country of Eritrea. The United Nations Human Rights Council describes the situation in the country as “dire,” listing arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance and torture by the authorities.

A French fisherman, Samba Sy Ndiaye, onboard one of the two fishing vessels which assisted the rescue operation and recovered some of the dead said, “The bodies of two women were very young. That hurt me. I cried all day. I couldn’t stop.”

According to the UN’s International Organisation for Migration (IMO), before this latest fatal sinking 30 people had died attempting to cross the Channel this year—the highest loss of life since 2021 when 45 deaths were recorded. The official figure for fatalities this year does not account for the number of missing recorded by the organisation as part of its Missing Migrant Project, which estimates that 226 people, including 35 children, are missing or have died attempting the crossing.

The state crackdown on smugglers who organise the crossings has only forced migrants into undertaking even more hazardous journeys, as they try to avoid the militarised border infrastructure established by the British

and French authorities against vulnerable people.

A BBC article supportive of the actions of the French police on their shorelines to intercept the boats acknowledged, “The gangs pack more people inside inflatable boats of ever more dubious quality—sometimes 90 people in a boat designed, or barely designed, to hold 40. It’s a problem exacerbated as the authorities succeed in disrupting the supply of boats brought to the coastline from deep within Europe.”

A *Guardian* article described how “Cameras installed on the beaches, night vision equipment and drones are used to stop boats from being launched from accessible beaches ...

“In such circumstances, desperate asylum seekers seeking refuge in the UK have little choice other than to take greater risks, charity workers say. They are launching from more remote beaches away from the police, committing to longer journeys, and are more likely to die at sea.”

Labour Home Secretary Yvette Cooper’s response to the mass drowning of women and children was a grotesque example of official hypocrisy. “Our hearts go out to the loved ones of all those who have lost their lives, and all those who have been seriously injured,” she said, before using the deaths as justification for the policies responsible for them, giving the shabby pretext of “dismantling the criminal smuggling gangs.”

The tragedy comes just a fortnight after Cooper began implementing the brutal anti-migrant agenda of the incoming Labour government, pledged to outdoing its Conservative predecessors with “new plans for the next 6 months to achieve the highest rate of removals of those with no right to be here, including failed asylum seekers, for 5 years.” These plans involve the deportation of around 14,500 people labelled illegal migrants, exceeding

the two previous six-month record highs set by the previous Conservative government of 13,410 in 2018 and 14,389 last year.

As part of its draconian approach to “securing borders”, the Labour government has also established a Gestapo-like Border Security Command, working with a Returns and Enforcement Unit to speed up deportations, and plans to reopen detention camps at Haslar and Campsfield—previously condemned by human rights groups for their human rights abuses and violations.

The government’s continued war on refugees came in the aftermath of the far-right riots in cities across England which included targeted attacks and arson against asylum seekers accommodated in hotels. In its manifesto, the Labour Party promised to end what it branded Home Office “asylum hotels”, complaining of their cost to the taxpayer.

The drownings off the Cape Gros-Nez will be used to deepen the co-operation between the British and French governments to strengthen the militarised border against migrants and refugees.

French Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin used the event to drum up demands for more funding from the UK for French border police. He complained that the £476 million provided to France, based on a three-year agreement signed in 2023, covered only a third of the cost.

Darmanin insisted, “We need a treaty—a migration treaty between the UK and the European Union—because the people who go now [are] people from the heart of Africa who want to go to the UK.” His right-wing comments, including criticism of the loosely regulated labour market in the UK acting as an attraction for undocumented migrants, were made in the context of the necessity to defend “Fortress Europe”—a collective project of the European ruling class which has drowned tens of thousands of migrants in the Mediterranean.

The meeting between Labour Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer and French President Emmanuel Macron last month to “reset” post-Brexit relations focussed primarily on anti-migrant co-operation, as well as escalating the NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine. The meeting was one of like-minded reactionaries and warmongers, with Macron refusing to recognise the result of the National Assembly elections and Starmer leading a government elected on the lowest turnout of eligible voters in history.

Enver Solomon, CEO of the Refugee Council, responded to Tuesday’s loss of life by arguing, “We must

create effective and humane pathways for those seeking refuge to reduce the need for dangerous crossings and prevent further tragedies,” before declaring the charity “ready to work constructively with the Government to build a fair, orderly and compassionate asylum system that prioritises human life and dignity.”

Such an appeal could not be more misdirected. The government is intent on preventing those most in need from reaching the UK and sees drowning as an effective deterrent. The ruling class in every country has a vested interest in scapegoating migrants and refugees for the shortage of everything which should be a guaranteed to all—a decent job, a living wage, an affordable home and access to high-quality health and education.

Moreover, it is not a question of “reduc[ing] the need for dangerous crossings” but ending them altogether. For this, a fight must be taken up to force the universal recognition of the right to asylum being torn to shreds by the British, French and all governments. Smugglers would have no market of vulnerable people to exploit if they could secure their democratic rights through official channels.

But these rights are increasingly unobtainable under capitalism, the domination of society by a corporate and financial elite and division of the world into rival nation states. They require a socialist struggle based on the unification of the international working class.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* responded to Cooper’s agenda as home secretary:

Workers and young people must turn to the building of their own internationalist party, the Socialist Equality Party, which together with our sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International fights for high-quality living standards all over the world and upholds the right of workers from every corner of the globe to live and work in whatever country they choose, with full citizenship rights.



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