

Britain: Workers must oppose prejudice against immigrants and asylum seekers

By Robert Skelton and Socialist Equality Party candidate for Manchester Central
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The Socialist Equality Party, in its campaign in Manchester Central, has repeatedly encountered workers who are by no means racist, but who argue that with jobs and public services under attack, immigration is too high and must be curbed.

I and my campaign team have insisted that the attacks on immigrants and asylum seekers by the media and the major parties are made in order to create divisions among working people and divert attention from the real cause of the deepest recession since the 1930s and the most draconian cuts in history.

The constant identification of immigrants and asylum seekers as a threat to jobs, or a competition for housing, health and education, is a policy of divide-and-rule which the British ruling class has pursued for decades at home and abroad. No ideological weapon has been more powerful in the preservation of its rule than the division of workers on the basis of colour, religion or ethnicity. This is a fundamental political question which working people everywhere must understand and reject, if they are to mount any effective response to the rapacious demands of their bosses.

According to the media, Britain is being swamped with immigrants who are living in the lap of luxury on welfare benefits at taxpayers' expense and queue-jumping the waiting lists for social housing.

On the far right, the British National Party insists that "immigrants aren't working" and are making "white Britons second class citizens". The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) claims that "immigration into the UK is out of control" and "forces down wages and hurts the traditional working class the most".

This type of anti-immigrant prejudice only amplifies and feeds off the positions advanced by the three main parties, which vie over which is toughest on immigration.

Labour boasts of its "tough but flexible" Australian-style points-based system and promises to curtail immigration further—with "irregular" migrants to be removed by force if necessary.

The Conservatives, supported by Migration Watch, have called for an annual cap of 50,000 immigrants a year. The Liberal Democrats say that "for too long, Britain's borders have been a soft touch" and that they will create a "firm but fair system" for asylum seekers.

The trade unions have done little or nothing to protect, integrate and organise migrant workers. Instead they have played a crucial role in fomenting divisions between workers, with their campaigns stressing the need for "local jobs" that chime in with the demand for "British jobs for British workers".

The truth is that net immigration reached a peak of 244,000 in 2004, after the accession of Eastern European countries to the European Union, but is now declining and may soon fall to 100,000 a year. These are workers who pay taxes, many have vital skills and they often take on the worst paid and hazardous jobs.

Asylum seekers, generally fleeing wars and economic and social catastrophes in which Britain played a major part such as Iraq, Afghanistan and the Balkans, are also small in number and declining due to Labour's punitive restrictions. According to Home Office figures, there were just 23,430 asylum applications in 2007, mostly from war-torn regions, rising to 27,900 including dependents. Of these 73 percent were refused any form of residency, even temporary leave to remain.

While the media claims that asylum seekers "jump the queue" for housing and social services, the truth is that Labour's 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act removed the right of asylum seekers to housing and all types of benefits. It created a new housing and subsistence scheme under the UK Border Agency to

disperse asylum claimants across the country, typically in the most deprived areas with few amenities.

As for “economic” migrants, they have limited entitlement to social welfare. Apart from those from Europe, immigrants who have been in Britain less than five years are not entitled to social housing—which is actually in short supply due to privatisation—or to housing benefits and tax credits.

While the politicians scream about the cost of such minimal provision, they think nothing about squandering £1 trillion to prop up Britain’s criminal and reckless banking system.

The lives of millions of working people have been blighted by hardship and economic insecurity by capitalism and the pro-big business agenda followed by Labour and the Tories before them. To conceal this basic fact, immigrants and asylum seekers are blamed for every imaginable social problem. While all parties routinely deny that measures to clampdown on immigrants and asylum are racist, their actions serve to legitimise racism and social divisions. They enable the openly xenophobic parties and sections of the media to channel social tensions in a right wing direction.

All the problems that workers and their families confront stem from their exploitation by a parasitic elite, which legally appropriates the wealth created by the working class by creaming off corporate and banking profits while at the same time refusing to pay tax themselves. Now, not content with that, the financial oligarchy has demanded, and got, the keys to the Treasury.

The enemy of working people is not only the corporations in Britain, but a global network of corporations and banks. They operate on an international scale to extract the greatest possible profit from the labour of the working class.

All the main political parties and trade unions act not on behalf of workers but corporate Britain, which seeks to regularise and discipline the influx of cheap labour as part of its drive to force down wages and conditions more generally and increase its own wealth at the expense of its international competitors.

The real issue is that the world is divided not by identity—be it religion, ethnicity or colour—but by classes which have diametrically opposed interests. Working people must reject all attempts to scapegoat immigrants and asylum seekers as a means of diverting

attention from the real sources of declining living standards and attacks on basic rights. They must use the methods of class struggle to oppose the ruling elite.

Above all what is required is unbreakable solidarity between workers in Britain and workers of all countries in united industrial and political action. The struggles of workers around the world against common attacks, common problems and a common enemy must be brought together on the basis of a common program.

This is the precondition for any effective opposition to the job cuts and austerity measures that are being demanded by the globally mobile transnational companies and banks that dominate the British and world economy. It means taking up an independent political struggle based upon internationalism and socialism against the government, the corporations and their lackeys in the trade unions.

The Socialist Equality Party fights for such an internationalist and socialist programme as the basis for uniting all sections of the working class—white and black, native-born and immigrant.

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