

Labour's racist record

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In mid-November the Asylum and Immigration Act 1999 became law. Its provisions mean hardship, social isolation and effective criminalisation for asylum seekers. Linda Miller and Kate Foster explain that support for racist legislation is nothing new, either from the Labour Party or Britain's trade union movement.

For centuries immigrants have arrived in London and other British cities, though in most decades since 1700 to the present substantially more people have left Britain than have come to live in it. In the 1880s, for example, the nation 'exported' some 820,000 more people than it received.

Even so, immigration fuelled violent passions among large sections of English and Scottish workers in the second half of the nineteenth century. The main target of their anger at that time were the Irish.

Spurred by the famines of the 1840s, tens of thousands of Irish peasants swelled the ranks of the proletariat in Britain over the course of the next two decades. Virtually all sections of the press fed religious and social prejudices against the Irish, who were crudely caricatured as lazy, disease-ridden and criminal.

Karl Marx, noted the debilitating impact of this virulent anti-Irish sentiment on the development of class consciousness among English workers in an 1870 letter:

'The ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers his standard of life. In relation to the Irish worker he feels himself a member of the ruling nation and so turns himself into a tool of the aristocrats and capitalists of his country against Ireland, thus strengthening their domination over himself.'

But for all the ill-feeling and recurrent violence against Irish immigrants, no government acted to stem Irish immigration. There were two key reasons for the 'liberal' attitude of the British ruling class: the height of Irish immigration coincided with a capitalist boom that generated a strong demand for cheap labour, and Britain's rulers found it essential to maintain the myth that Ireland was an integral part of the United Kingdom.

By the end of the nineteenth century, however, sections of the political elite would adopt a very different attitude to immigration, on a much smaller scale, from Eastern Europe. An unholy alliance between sections of the labour movement and demagogic Tory MPs would pave the way to the Aliens Act 1905, the first modern-day legislation to restrict immigration into Britain.

Across Britain in 1892 more than 40 labour movement bodies adopted resolutions calling for restrictions on immigration, especially by East European Jews. Trades councils in London, Leeds, Liverpool and Manchester were among those advocating immigration controls. The resolution passed by Manchester Trades Council that year was shamelessly reactionary:

'It is time that workers of this country . . . rose up and protested with firmness . . . against the continuation of this curse [of Jewish immigration]?'.

Later in 1892 the TUC would declare its support for legal barriers to immigration. Four years later the trade union leadership sent a delegation to the Home Secretary supporting anti-immigrant legislation, sponsored by the Tory Lord Salisbury.

The East End of London was the primary focus for Jewish immigrants, fleeing Tsarist pogroms in imperial Russia and similar anti-Semitic massacres and discriminatory legislation in sections of the Austro-Hungarian empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A notoriously anti-Semitic Tory MP, Major Evans-Gordon, held his seat in Stepney (East London), with significant working class support, even during the Liberal landslide of 1906.

Evans-Gordon had founded the British Brothers League, the forerunner to Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists, in the East End in 1901 and was one of the driving forces behind the 1905 legislation.

The Aliens Act 1905 marked a crucial turning point in the politics of immigration. Sections of the capitalist class and the labour movement had collaborated to establish xenophobic and racist legislation on the statute book. Partly as a result of this, nearly a century later the majority of the population see immigration controls as necessary, reasonable and historically inevitable.

The populist agitation culminating in the 1905 legislation did, however, provoke stiff opposition, mainly from Jewish workers' organisations. An outstanding example of such resistance was a September 1894 conference in Whitechapel, East London, organised by the Federated Jewish Tailors' Union in response to the TUC's support for restrictive legislation. The meeting hall, with a capacity of 3,000, was packed to the rafters. Thousands more who could not gain entry filled adjacent streets.

The conference adopted a resolution stating that 'the vast amount of poverty and misery which exists is in no way due to the influx of foreign workmen but is the result of private ownership of the means of production'.

The following year ten predominantly Jewish unions signed the first popular leaflet against immigration controls. Its authors asserted that immigrant and 'native' English workers had a common enemy in the capitalist class and reminded the English of their 'duty to combine against a common enemy, [rather] than fight against us, whose interests are identical with yours'.

An important minority of politically advanced trade unionists joined with their Jewish comrades in calling for class unity, regardless of ethnicity or religion, as the only effective response to low wages, and appalling working and living conditions. Rallies, with some labour movement backing, took place in London and Leeds, while 1902 saw the formation of the Aliens Defence League. Eleanor Marx (Karl's daughter) was among its founding members. The early twentieth century also witnessed the development of locally-based organisations such as the Manchester Protest Committee to champion the rights of immigrant workers and oppose restrictive legislation.

This agitation didn't stop the 1905 measures, but it helped check the growth of racist ideology in British unions. The TUC leadership, for instance, halted its campaign for immigration controls until the late 1950s.

The Aliens Act declared that an 'undesirable immigrant' who 'cannot show that he has in his possession or is in a position to obtain the means of decently supporting himself' should be denied entry to Britain. The statistics for successful asylum applications over the next few years illustrate the cruel implementation of this legislation. In 1906 more than 500 people were granted asylum, whereas by 1908 the figure had fallen to 20 and by 1910 stood at just five.

Parliament followed the 1905 Act up with further acts in 1914 and 1919. These attacked not only those

seeking to enter Britain, but also people from other national origins who had already settled in this country. The 1914 measures empowered the state to deport aliens, who had previously been lawfully resident in the UK, irrespective of whether or not they had a criminal conviction. Not surprisingly, in light of the leading role Jewish workers had played in building some of the most radical labour movement organisations in London's East End, Manchester and Glasgow, the act made it a criminal offence for an alien to 'promote industrial unrest'.

A large number of East European Jews who had gained asylum in an earlier period found themselves legally branded between 1914 and 1918 as 'enemy aliens'. Many of them joined the ranks of 29,000 foreign nationals interned in special camps. In what would prove an especially bitter irony these facilities were actually labelled 'concentration camps'.

The 1919 legislation removed the right to asylum. Throughout the 1920s anti-immigrant legislation blocked Jewish workers who continued to flee anti-Semitic persecution in Eastern Europe. The acts also provided the legal pretext for the forcible deportation of dozens of Jewish leftists. During Ramsey MacDonald's 1929-31 Labour government, one prominent Russian Jewish revolutionary, Leon Trotsky, was denied asylum in Britain as he sought refuge from Stalin's brutal dictatorship.

Immigration controls provided a cloak of legitimacy to successive British governments in the 1930s as politicians turned a blind eye to the plight of Jews in central Europe. While the Nazis consolidated their grip over Germany and Austria, between 1933 and 1939 the UK authorities admitted only 50,000 Jews.

That figure would have been even lower but for an April 1933 meeting where Jewish community leaders agreed with the Home Secretary that no refugee who gained admission would become 'a charge to public funds'. Subsequently, the Jewish Refugee Committee raised funds to support those fleeing the gathering Holocaust.

Even then, the UK imposed new visa requirements on German and Austrian nationals in 1938. The vast majority of those affected were Jews fleeing the certainty of death under Nazi rule. The Foreign Office issued secret instructions to British consulates in central Europe indicating that the main purpose of the visa requirement was to: 'regulate the flow into the United Kingdom of persons who may wish to take refuge there in considerable numbers'. Before granting a visa, passport control officers were obliged to ascertain whether the 'applicant is likely to be an asset in the United Kingdom.'

Also in 1938 the government revived the category of 'enemy aliens'. This label again applied not only to Jews seeking refuge but to long-settled Jewish workers. From 1939 until 1945 the 'enemy aliens' category extended to all German, Austrian and eventually Italian nationals. While those interned under this legislation included numerous fascist sympathisers a significant minority comprised German and Austrian Jews, European leftists and even members of the International Brigade who had fought against fascism in the Spanish Civil War.

The numbers interned grew in May 1940 as more of continental Europe fell under Nazi control. The exact ethnic and religious composition of internees is not known, but a survey of one camp revealed that more than 80 per cent of its inmates were Jewish and that nearly a third of these had escaped from Nazi prisons.

Squalor and the virtual absence of medical facilities characterised these hell-holes. In Bury, for example, a facility holding 2,000 people lacked running water and its 'toilets' consisted of six buckets. Inmates slept on grease-covered factory floors amid abandoned machinery.

Such conditions provoked resistance, with internees staging a hunger strike which gained some support

among trade unionists in Greater Manchester. The main voice of opposition to internment and the deportation to Canada and Australia of central European refugees continued, however, to come from the Jewish community, with only occasional backing from trade union branches which passed resolutions that rarely translated into any action.

By this stage the official leadership of the labour movement was thoroughly incorporated into Britain's war effort, stomping on strikes against ever harsher workplace conditions, and suspending all criticism of Churchill's coalition government in which Labour and union leaders played a key role.

On the one hand, then, trade union bureaucrats accepted internment, at the same time as encouraging a begrudging acceptance of so-called New Commonwealth immigrants, primarily from the Caribbean, who had come to bolster both Britain's armed forces and civilian production.

There was government-sponsored recruitment of 1,200 workers from British Honduras (now Belize) to be lumberjacks in Scotland, while another 1,000 West Indians came to work in munitions factories in the North West of England. In addition, an estimated 10,000 West Indian men came to Britain to join RAF ground crews, while thousands more signed up for the army and navy where they were joined by many West Africans and South Asians.

The welcome was rarely warm, but organised racist hostility during the war years was also minimal. This relatively tolerant atmosphere would change dramatically by the end of the 1940s as it became evident that some of the war-time black workers wanted to remain in Britain and others sought escape from mass unemployment and poverty in what remained Britain's Caribbean colonies. In contrast to the economic desperation in the West Indies, there was a post-war boom in Britain, sparking a high demand for semi and unskilled labour in many parts of the country.

In the 1950s however, pressure was mounting for tighter curbs on immigration, targeted primarily at people from the New Commonwealth.

In the late summer of 1958 large-scale racist violence intensified with anti-black rioting in west London's Notting Hill and the west central area of Nottingham. The local Labour MP for North Kensington, George Rogers, came close to excusing the racist violence as he called on the then Tory government to 'introduce legislation quickly to end the tremendous influx of coloured people from the Commonwealth. . . . overcrowding has fostered vice, drugs, prostitution and the use of knives. For years the white people have been tolerant. Now their tempers are up.' Rogers' views found an echo from James Harrison, a Labour MP in Nottingham, who had consistently advocated further restrictions on immigration immediately after the Second World War.

The views of Rogers and Harrison remained very much on the margins of Labour in opposition. Labour's national executive adopted a liberal 'anti-racist' statement in the wake of the Notting Hill and Nottingham riots, which the popular press wrongly depicted as opposition to immigration controls generally. Meanwhile, the top table at the TUC had issued a call for further curbs:

'Countries of origin should impose gates to prevent people leaving for the UK.'

Later that autumn the TUC General Council actually approached the Conservative government to encourage it to adopt a scheme to 'bar anyone entering the UK from the black Commonwealth without work vouchers'. The Tory conference did agree to a remarkably similar position that year. In the twilight of their 13 years in power the Tories granted the TUC bureaucrats' wish with the passage of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962.

Initially, Labour opposed the 1962 legislation, but over the course of the next three years Labour under Harold Wilson carried out a policy shift on immigration controls that was as dramatic as any about-face by Jack Straw and New Labour. After its narrow win at the 1964 general election, the party not only retained the 1962 act but reached an informal accommodation with the Tories on immigration issues in return for their support for the mild anti-discrimination measures embodied in the first Race Relations Act (1965).

Figures such as Home Secretary Roy Jenkins and junior minister Roy Hattersley promoted the argument that the tight control of the flow of immigrants, especially those from New Commonwealth countries, was essential to 'promote integration and good race relations.' The problem ceased to be either white racism or the inability of capitalism to provide decent living standards for all but the willingness of immigrants to conform.

This all-party consensus on immigration fractured as a result of Enoch Powell's increasingly vocal campaign against immigration and for the repatriation of workers who had come from the New Commonwealth. The Labour government had already moved amendments to tighten up the 1962 Tory legislation. In early 1968, to appease popular racism, Labour pushed through its own Commonwealth Immigrants Act, aimed particularly at barring Asians, then living in Kenya and holding British passports, from coming to Britain. But Labour's introduction of tighter immigration controls only encouraged Powell to plumb new depths of racist demagoguery, with his infamous 'rivers of blood' speech in April 1968.

Though Tory opposition leader Ted Heath sacked Powell from his shadow cabinet shortly afterwards, he never disowned him as a parliamentary candidate. Heath was aware that there was majority support for Powell's views in Conservative associations. Partly as a sop to Powell's supporters, the 1970 Tory manifesto included a pledge to introduce yet another major piece of legislation to restrict black immigration: the third such act in less than nine years.

The Immigration Act 1971 went through parliament with only ritual opposition from Labour. The TUC, despite the significant growth of African-Caribbean and Asian memberships in several unions, explicitly refused to condemn the latest legislation. But a discernible shift had begun both within the ranks of the Labour Party and the unions.

Mounting self-organisation within both the African-Caribbean and Asian communities, partly influenced by the US civil rights movement and the later wave of militancy associated with the Black Panthers, had laid the basis for a growing opposition to the legislation of the 1962-71 period. Such developments, combined with the growing radicalism of large numbers of white working class and middle class youth, inspired by the international struggles of the 1960s, had an impact on the labour movement.

The most concrete expression of that progressive change in the unions came in 1974 when the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) took up the case of an immigrant worker and union member, Franco Caprino, who faced the threat of deportation. Caprino, worked for the Grand Metropolitan hotel chain, where the TGWU successfully recruited immigrant workers in a unionisation drive, focused on the company's appalling working practices.

The Caprino case was a milestone. Since then more and more unions have recognised the duty to support members and their families threatened with deportation. But this new commitment to backing individual black members went alongside the TUC's Hotel and Catering Committee 1978 call on the industry's bosses to enforce sanctions against immigrant workers. The committee's statement argued that:

'There was a problem of unauthorised employment of visitors from overseas which undermined the development of collective bargaining, and the terms and conditions of employment within the industry.'

In a real sense union bureaucrats were using the same arguments deployed by their precursors for more than a century: cheap immigrant labour undermined wages and bargaining power, so excusing the union leaders from the fight for class solidarity to struggle for better conditions and equal status for all workers, whether 'native' or immigrant.

Meanwhile, Labour had returned to office in 1974. Roy Jenkins was again Home Secretary, pursuing a programme of piecemeal reform that included a much more extensive Race Relations Act (1976). In a speech to the Commons in support of the legislation, Jenkins returned to a familiar theme:

'There is a clear limit to the amount of immigration which this country can absorb and . . . it is in the interests of the racial minorities themselves to maintain a strict control over immigration.'

By April 1976 Labour had sacked Home Office minister Alex Lyon for being 'soft' in his enforcement of immigration controls. Less than two years later a parliamentary select committee on race and immigration issued a unanimous report that foreshadowed key aspects of the Thatcher government's Nationality Act 1981. Its recommendations included still tighter controls, an abolition of amnesty provisions for 'illegal' immigrants, the introduction of internal controls for many black people residing in the UK and a register of their dependants.

Labour and the TUC felt obliged to address the significant increase in electoral support for the fascist National Front, which gained 100,000 votes in the spring 1977 Greater London Council elections. This result came against the background of rising unemployment where the NF's scapegoating of black people was all the more likely to strike a resonant chord.

But Labour tailored its agenda in office to placate tabloid-induced racist panics and popular racism among voters. At the same time its post-1976 austerity policies - authored by the International Monetary Fund - alienated a growing section of its working class base, helping prepare the ground for Thatcherism.

In stark contrast to Thatcher's barely coded messages to National Front voters and strident promise of still tighter immigration controls, the 1979 Labour manifesto sought to skirt around race and immigration altogether. Thatcher, of course, would fulfil her vicious promises.

In addition to the Nationality Act 1981 and Immigration Act 1988 the Thatcher decade witnessed a long series of measures to deter immigrants entering the UK, restrict the citizenship rights of black workers already resident here and make the reunification of families ever more difficult.

There have, of course, been a number of brave and committed struggles on behalf of individual union members, school students and their families. The former local government union Nalgo (now a component of Unison) adopted a paper position calling for the abolition of all immigration controls at its 1990 conference, with that September's TUC rejecting it in favour of a call for 'heavy penalties on illegal labour trafficking' and the implementation of 'non-racist' controls.

The 1990s have witnessed further legislative attacks by the Tories in 1993 and 1996, and now Labour in 1999, targeted primarily against refugees from Third World countries and most recently Roma people fleeing racist attacks and systematic discrimination in the ex-Stalinist states of Eastern Europe. Of course, the measures pursued by UK governments are hardly unique. The European Union's member states are committed to the creation of a 'Fortress Europe', effectively sealed off from refugees and 'economic migrants' from the non-white world. Similarly, the United States has drastically tightened its border controls and criminalised an ever larger layer of would-be immigrants.

At root all immigration controls rest on ideologies that are inherently racist and promote national

chauvinism. As important as campaigns to support individuals and families are, socialists must go further to raise the call for the scrapping of all abolition controls and decisively confront the legal restrictions on workers' free movement and the ideology that underpins these restrictions.

Racism serves to obscure capitalism's failure to provide a decent life for all even in its imperialist heartlands. Its poisonous vapours conceal from view the crimes of our rulers, not only against the workers of their own country, but against workers globally. They arm and prop up brutal regimes in the semi-colonial world to ensure the profitable operation of the multinational corporations based in Europe, North America and Japan and then target the victims of these regimes through anti-refugee and anti-immigrant propaganda and laws.

Today's laws against asylum seekers descend directly from the Aliens Act 1905. While drawing inspiration from the struggles of Jewish immigrant workers and generations of African-Caribbean and Asian workers who have mounted resistance during the twentieth century, socialists must renew the tough ideological fight within the labour movement for the abolition of all immigration controls at the start of the twenty-first.

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