No refuge for Cameron in asylum crisis

Jeremy Dewar, Workers Power 385 Thu, 17/09/2015 - 12:03
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Over 100,000 people marched through the streets of London on Saturday 12 September under the slogan, ?Refugees Welcome Here?. It was the biggest pro-migrant demonstration we have seen for many years. Not only did the crowd cheer every point that brand new Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn said, but it also gave notice to David Cameron that his attempt to draw a line under this simmering crisis has not succeeded.

After days of briefing the press that Britain would finally succumb to public, European Union and United Nations pressure to admit its share of refugees fleeing wars and dictatorships, David Cameron told Parliament earlier this month that the UK would help just 20,000 Syrians relocate on our shores over the next five years. That amounts to only 4,000 a year. In fact, it has since emerged that it will take nearly a year for the first refugees to arrive, so bureaucratic are the rules governing the scheme. On the same day, France agreed to welcome 24,000 refugees over two years: a grossly inadequate response but still three times Cameron?s offer.

To put both these figures in perspective, the previous weekend, Germany opened its doors to 18,000 asylum seekers, nearly matching the UK?zs five-year target, in just two days. Angela Merkel?s government says it expects to receive 800,000 refugees this year alone, a number that it admits could grow to 1 million.

Vulnerable Persons Relocation
To add insult to injury, the prime minister said not a single one of the refugees who have risked life and limb, clambering aboard unseaworthy dinghies, walking miles along rail tracks, or boarding airtight lorries at Calais, would be allowed into Fortress Britain.

Instead, he would only admit ?those most in need?, the very young or the very old, the infirm or the victims of torture, who remained in camps in Turkey, Lebanon or Jordan, via the Vulnerable Persons Relocation (VPR) scheme. Those who managed to escape the humanitarian crisis that traps millions in destitution will be punished.

Is this the same Tory party that chides the unemployed for sitting back and expecting a handout? It appears that the ?get on your bike? clarion call and paeans to the ?aspirational individuals? are a cynical pretext for cutting benefits and sanctioning the jobless. In reality, the Tories simply hate the poor.

The VPR is in truth a wretched get-out clause that few countries even bother to explore. Under its rules, a mere 216 Syrians have been granted asylum in Britain since March 2014. The oft-quoted figure of nearly 5,000 Syrians who have been relocated here actually refers mostly to Syrians already living in the UK who cannot return home. Shamefully, 145 Syrians have been deported back to Syria since 2011.

Cameron referred to this initiative as the ?modern equivalent of the Kinder transport?. Although schools generally teach this as an example of ?British values?, it only rescued 9-10,000 mainly Jewish children in 1938-40. Yet 6 million Jews were killed in the Holocaust; Britain, along with the USA, refused entry to Jewish people who escaped the Holocaust after 1945. Unknowingly for sure, perhaps Cameron is right to make the comparison. Pitiful.

Raiding foreign aid budget
The immediate response from councils around the country was to ask how the government would help them cope with the new refugees, many of whom would be orphans or traumatised and so needing significant support. The financial crisis among local authorities has become especially acute after years of cuts in central government grants and the Downing Street enforced cap on council tax.
George Osborne therefore came up with the proposal that money could be diverted from the foreign aid budget to help pay for the housing and local service costs in the first year; what happens after then was left unanswered.

The question posed by this accountancy wheeze is, who will suffer as a result of the foreign aid budget being effectively cut? Why, among others, the very same refugee camps on Syria’s borders that the Tory government claims it is trying to relieve.

The United Nations suddenly announced in early September that its agencies were broke and they could no longer provide the meagre $13 food vouchers they were handing out each month to the 3.79 million refugees on Syria’s borders; 189 health clinics in Iraq have already closed.

The reason was simple. The world’s richest countries, including the UK, had not fulfilled funding promises, while an average 42,000 refugees a day were swelling the camps. As one Syrian father told the BBC, ?What am I supposed to do? I would rather take my chances travelling to Europe with my children and risk sudden death than watch them die slowly from hunger.? Who wouldn?t agree with that?

Former Lib Dem leader Paddy Ashdown was the unlikely highlighter of a further problem with VPR status refugees. He tweeted, ?Refugee orphans and children brought in under Cameron?s scheme will be deported at age 18.?

Although the government denies this, it certainly has been the case so far that many vulnerable children, denied full refugee status, have been ?sent back? on turning 18, often to devastated countries they can barely remember and where they know no one. Cameron has deliberately kept this option open, claiming Syrians can apply for full refugee after five years without guaranteeing their success.

Who knows what the political situation will be like in 2020? Maybe this target of 5,000 refugees will be long forgotten and the Tories will be able to bury news of their failure to meet it in a written response to Prime Minister?s Questions. Maybe, as seems likely at the moment, the European Union will have shut its doors and its ears to the cries of those displaced by its military and economic policies.

Germany for one quickly changed her tune, sending troops to her borders to repel a further 40,000 refugees, and ?temporarily? re-instating its border with Austria, thus placing the Schengen agreement in jeopardy.

Of course, it was Britain which torpedoed attempts at an equitable distribution of asylum seekers and encouraged European powers to pile up refugees at border crossings and rail terminals. It was Britain which first put up fences and refused entry to 3-4,000 refugees and migrants in Calais.

How dare they cast aspersions on Hungary, when the UK is equally vile, more so if you consider its leading role.

This could become a huge blow to the project of political union across Europe and a significant shift to the right; racism and xenophobia would rise as the far right and racist populists claim ?victory? for their policies of exclusion.

Military Aggression

The Tories? response, however, poses a bigger danger than even this. Cameron has used the refugee crisis as an excuse to justify renewed British military attacks on ISIS in Syria, in the regions from which people are fleeing. He suggested that if Britain were to engage in bombing Syria, as it is presently bombing northern Iraq, this would contribute to solving the refugee problem.

Leave aside the fact that it was Britain?s invasion of Iraq, as the major ally of the US, that helped create ISIS in the first place; their bombing is unlikely to defeat ISIS in any case. Worse this ?pin-point bombing?, as we know, kills many more civilians than fighters.

In addition it has provided a pretext for the repressive Islamist regime and Nato ally Turkey to ?fight ISIS? by attacking the Kurds of the PKK whose equivalents in Syria (Rojava) have proved the most determined and effective fighters against ISIS.
Yet Cameron cynically coupled his announcement on the 20,000 refugees with the news that the RAF had executed, by means of unmanned drones, three ISIS fighters in Syria who were British citizens. This poses a number of serious questions, which acting Labour leader Harriet Harman ducked, but Jeremy Corbyn has promised to raise.

First, it appears to defy a parliamentary vote back in August 2013, when former leader Ed Miliband led a rebellion that blocked British military action in Syria. Then Cameron told the Commons, ?It is very clear to me the British parliament, reflecting the view of the British people, does not want see military action. I get that and the Government will act accordingly.? Now he appears not to ?get it?. The fact that it was an ?unmanned? aircraft does not make any difference to the fact that it was a British finger that pulled the trigger ? or pressed the button.

Second, it signals that Britain is prepared to join the ranks of Israel?s Mossad and the Pentagon in asserting their right to assassinate opponents, anywhere in the world, with neither parliamentary permission nor UN resolutions.

As with Israel, the plea of self-defence also bears no relation to reality. The only two ?plots? Cameron claims the Islamic State supporters were instrumental in were supposed to take place in May and June this year. Since neither amounted to anything, is this really proof of their ?threat to Britain?? Of course, the merit of extra-judicial killings, for the regimes that prefer them, is that these claims are never tested either in parliament or in a court.

Third, stepping up military action in Iraq and Syria will do nothing to bring about peace in the region. It is precisely Western onslaughts on states and horrendous ?collateral damage? to innocent civilians that radicalises young Muslims in the Middle East and in Europe or North America. On the contrary, it will fan the flames that are devouring the region. It will create more refugees.

Britain?s motives in the Middle East remain as they always were: to prop up or install pro-Western regimes like Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States and Egypt that can secure the oilfields for investment and profit, and deny free access to the strategically important region to its imperialist rivals, Russia and China.

Saudi Arabia, the deeply sectarian dictatorship which receives billions in military aid and weapons from the West and its arms manufacturers, is concurrently heading a coalition of Sunni Arab states to intervene in Yemen?s civil war. The UN accuses it of war crimes, deliberately bombing civilian targets and infrastructure.

The only reason you don?t see Yemeni refugees in Europe is that Saudi armed forces have holed them in on the southern tip of the peninsula. They have nowhere to go.

The tragedy for the Syrians is that they live in a battleground between these rival powers. Russia backs and arms the murderous Assad regime and America and its local allies fan the flames of Islamist terrorism until it turns on them. Those Syrian revolutionaries and Kurdish nationalists caught in the middle receive no support whatsoever.

Opposition

The response from Labour?s front bench has been totally inadequate. Acting leader Harriet Harman, following her discredited strategy of not opposing the Tories for fear this made Labour look too distinct from the winners of last May?s elections, said that the government was doing the ?right thing?. Her only quibble was that 4,000 a year might be too low a figure.

In an attempt to boost her chances of topping the leadership poll, the Parliamentary Labour Party gave Yvette Cooper the honour of putting a number to this policy: 10,000 in the first year.

Two problems with this: first, 10,000 is clearly too low a figure to make any significant difference; second, Cooper has no track record in supporting migrants and asylum seekers, in fact, she voted for every single Bill Tony Blair?s government introduced to tighten regulations and squeeze living standards for those claiming refuge.

It has to be said that even Jeremy Corbyn chose to sidestep the issue with vague remarks, rather than be seen to come out clearly in support of opening the borders.

The response of the working and popular classes, however, has been tremendous. The massive march in London on 12 September reflects the mass activity of thousands of people donating tents, clothing and medical supplies, and making
the journey to Calais to deliver them.

In the process, hundreds of new activists are meeting migrants and refugees, hearing their stories and learning that this is not an isolated moment or reducible to Syria; migrants from Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan and Eritrea are also deserving of a welcome and a safe home in the UK, and the right to work, settle and raise their families here.

As well as schools, churches and mosques, socialist organisations and trade union branches have been central to this upsurge of charity. The task now is to translate this into real, lasting solidarity. Trade unionists and socialists must link up with the migrant and refugee organisations in the camps, providing European working class support, and cover, for their protest actions. They should contact and support sister organisations in Calais, France and the rest of Europe in any actions they can take to highlight the plight of the refugees, including strikes and mass demos.

Finally, the Labour Party should urgently review its policy, not through cosseted forums, nor under the hegemony of the unrepresentative MPs, but through a grassroots discussion in the wards, constituencies and affiliated union branches. In this debate, thrown up by the crisis, socialists should argue for:

? No immigration controls ? all refugees welcome here
? For all migrants to enjoy full citizenship, the right to work and to vote
? No to military action in the Middle East ? troops, aircraft and ships out of the region now.

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