

Refugees, Capitalism and the British State: The roots of refugees' oppression and implications for action

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Based on the book published by Ashgate (2012)

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1. Introduction

This pamphlet is an attempt to provide an accessible introduction that exposes the interests that have shaped UK asylum policies in the early twenty-first century. A lot has been written describing the terrible consequences of the UK asylum system for people who flee here as refugees, but unless we understand the root causes of these policies and practices, refugees and those who support them are left in the dark when trying to develop an effective strategy to respond.

I argue that UK asylum policies are neither the result of ignorance and incompetence on the part of policymakers and officials, nor part of a racist conspiracy. Instead, they result from a fundamental contradiction between refugees' claims to asylum and the dominant capitalist interests that are represented by the British state. This contradiction has intensified as a result of the capitalist crisis and today dominates the context in which refugees and their supporters work. Understanding the contradiction between refugees and the British state therefore needs to form the starting point for developing an effective strategy, whatever the particular forms of struggle, campaigning or practice we are engaged in.

A clarification is needed at the start about the terms used in this pamphlet. References to 'refugees' include all those who have come to Britain seeking refuge, whatever the status currently accorded them by the British state (as 'asylum seekers', 'failed asylum seekers', and so on). Where relevant I specify whether an individual is with or without 'status', in the sense of some form of leave to remain in Britain.

The research behind the pamphlet

This pamphlet draws on research I began in 2005. It is only possible to give a brief outline of some of the findings here, for a more detailed and nuanced account I refer readers to my book, *Refugees, Capitalism and the British State: Implications for social workers, volunteers and activists*, published by Ashgate in 2012, and to the website <http://refugeescapitalismstate.wordpress.com>. I also draw on comments and discussion following talks and presentations I have given since the book's publication, in Newcastle, Durham, Middlesbrough, Leeds and London, and reviews the book has received to date. I am very grateful for all of the feedback I have received.

Several factors lead me to start the research behind this pamphlet. From 2005, I was involved in organising with refugees in Newcastle, primarily against deportations. This increased my awareness of the extreme hardships facing refugees as a direct consequence of state policies in Britain. These hardships include direct repression, systematic and forced destitution, a separate and substandard welfare system that some have described as apartheid,¹ and levels of insecurity that breed widespread fear and anxiety. In 2005 I was also working as a professional youth worker. I was aware of the general contradiction within youth work, social work and similar professions, between a duty of care and a mission of social control; this seemed particularly acute in work with refugees without status because of the apparent hostility of the British state toward this group. Through my professional contacts and my campaigning, I knew people who were struggling with the expectations imposed by their professional

roles and employers that at times contradicted their personal and professional values and limited how far they could go to support refugees. The British state has increasingly expected welfare professionals to monitor the immigration status of people they work with, share information with immigration officials and other arms of the state involved in direct repression, and use immigration status as a basis for granting or withholding resources and services.² I focused on the voluntary sector to explore the grey areas between direct state control and independent action.

Once I began the research, I quickly realised there was a very significant amount of work being done in the voluntary sector by refugees themselves that was essential to the functioning of the asylum system, most of it unpaid and much of it done by refugees without status. This posed a question: why were people helping to deliver a system that oppressed the group they were part of, with no direct material incentive? To try and answer this question I focused my research on refugees working in unpaid roles. Once I started to read the academic literature, several questions seemed to be posed repeatedly, with no apparent answer:

- why were refugees without status prohibited from doing paid work, when many had skills needed by British employers, and even while the government was actively recruiting overseas through a ‘highly skilled migrants programme’?
- why was the state treating refugees in such an inhumane way, in apparent contradiction to its claims of liberal democratic values?
- why was the asylum system reported so frequently to be inconsistent and lacking in transparency and fairness?

I was already a Marxist when I started this research, and Marxism seemed to offer an approach that could start to answer these questions, beginning with the social relations of production, in other words the way production and reproduction are organised in our society. The Marxist approach suggested the need to ask questions such as:

- In order to understand the the reception of refugees in Britain, what is the particular character of British capitalism? Where does Britain fit in to the international capitalist system?
- How does the British state relate to this, as the ultimate governor of national citizenship and asylum claims? What is the relationship between the British state and British capital?
- Are there any connections between British companies, the British state and the situations that force people to become refugees?
- What role does migration play in British capitalism in general, and how do refugees fit in to this?
- What can be learned from the longer history of migration and asylum in Britain, to help us understand the current situation?

My approach to these questions was influenced by my background as an activist, which gave me an interest in the relationship between national and global processes and the individual and local level where grassroots organising takes place, and my

background as a practitioner, which gave me an interest in developing radical practice in the spaces between the intentions and the outcomes of capitalist state policy.³

Below, I summarise some of the main conclusions of my research. I begin with the contradictory tendencies of contemporary capitalism, which both produce situations that force people to flee regardless of demand for their labour, and require migrants to act as units of wage labour under strict labour market discipline. In this context I consider the political role played by UK asylum policies since 1999, including detention, forced dispersal, prohibition of paid employment and a decision-making process that is formally fair but in practice set up to fail the majority of refugees. I conclude by exploring how refugees and those seeking to support them have responded to this situation, and propose implications for action.

¹ Mynott, E. (2002). 'From a shambles to a new apartheid', in *From Immigration Controls to Welfare Controls*, edited by S. Cohen et al. London: Routledge.

² Humphries, B. (2004). 'An unacceptable role for social work: implementing immigration policy'. *British Journal of Social Work*, 34(1), 93-107.

³ Shaw, M. and I. Martin (2000). 'Community work, citizenship and democracy: re-making the connection'. *Community Development Journal*, 35(4), 401-413.

2. Capitalism and the creation of refugees

my life didn't start here, it started in Africa, I'm from Africa, so if you want to divide the chapters, start like where I come from, about Congo (38 year old refugee woman, arrived in Britain in 2002)

To understand refugee settlement, we need to consider the wider context within which people are forced to flee, as Debra Hayes puts it, 'whether through crippling destitution, war or persecution'.⁴ While particular circumstances vary, the root causes of much of the displacement of people in the contemporary world can be traced to capitalism in its imperialist stage. This stage of capitalism is characterised by:

- a division of the world into oppressed and oppressor nations;
- systematic under-development and super-exploitation of oppressed countries;
- the nurturing of authoritarian states to enforce super-exploitation in the oppressed countries;
- a drive to divide and re-divide the world between the major imperialist powers, leading to repeated military interventions by imperialist states in defence of their current and future investments.

In short, crippling destitution, persecution and war are the hallmarks of imperialism for much of the world's population, and focusing attention on this wider system is vital to understanding the movements of refugees and their reception within Britain.

Modern day imperialism

we have to know that politics is quite involved. Congo for example, the country that I come from, there have been more than three and half million dead...now there's a representation of the United Nations in the war zone. What we didn't hear...officially and unofficially...[the UN have] been the one that have been facilitating the different groups [that are fighting]...if they know that there's gold, there's coltan...and [they can take it] for free...[then they think] we have to leave that chaos as long as it takes (refugee man, arrived in Britain in 2002)

In the first decades of the twentieth century, Lenin observed the growth of industry and the concentration of production in ever-larger industries to be 'one of the most characteristic features of capitalism',⁵ tending towards increasingly uneven development between capital-intensive imperialist countries and materially underdeveloped oppressed countries, and constituting a distinct stage of capitalism as monopoly increasingly replaced free competition. Imperialist finance capital is composed of a fusion of manufacturing and banking capital, organised in companies whose operations are multinational but whose control and ownership remain concentrated in particular advanced capitalist countries. These countries become increasingly wealthy as a result of returns on capital invested in poor and less industrially-developed countries. This creates a situation that, at a high level of abstraction, can be characterised as a division of the world between imperialist, oppressor countries, where ownership and control of capital is concentrated, and oppressed, impoverished countries, whose economic development is held back and whose labour and resources are systematically plundered to the benefit of imperialist

countries. These inter-national processes play a major role in shaping class relations within Britain, embedded in every aspect of life, from food and energy prices to occupational patterns to the character of Britain's trade unions. The international is not just 'out there', it is also 'here' at a local level.⁶ Racism plays a central role in mediating the contradictions inherent in imperialism, by providing ideological cover for international inequalities and justification for the British state's interference in oppressed countries, whose populations are frequently portrayed as too violent, corrupt or lazy to fully govern themselves.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, the imperialist character of capitalism intensified, taking on new and expansive forms. High rates of return on investments in oppressed countries have played a crucial role in raising the average rate of profit and thereby generating the incentives to invest, which are necessary for continued capital circulation. This is vital both for the functioning of the capitalist system as a whole and for the prosperity of imperialist countries such as Britain. In 2005, Britain received an average rate of return of 5.0% on investments in oppressed, materially underdeveloped countries, while countries investing in Britain received an average rate of return of only 2.6%.⁷ To illustrate the conditions of super-exploitation that this represents, consider Apple's iPhone: 22% of profits on this commodity are generated through the labour cost savings by carrying out assembly in China instead of the US. Apple makes these savings by outsourcing the assembly process to a company called Foxconn, which employs hundreds of thousands of workers at its plant in Shenzhen, working for around 83 US cents per hour, for long hours, with workers living at the factory for months at a time.⁸ Conditions are so bad that in 2011, following the eleventh worker's suicide the company erected nets below dormitory windows. In 2012 workers at the plant fought back and riot police were sent in. This is the basis of the super-profits that are increasingly essential to the success of the capitalist economies of imperialist countries such as the US and Britain. Between 1997 and 2007, Britain's overseas assets tripled, reaching £6,357.9 billion, more than four and a half times Britain's Gross Domestic Product (GDP),⁹ and have continued to grow since then. This level of super-exploitation demonstrates the particularly parasitic relationship Britain has with other countries.

The consequences of under-development

I don't even agree with people who say...we should make [a] difference between asylum seeker[s] and economic migrant[s], because...just look what they're doing to...economic [migrants] (refugee woman, arrived in Britain in 2005)

Imperialism involves an international division of labour that both discriminates against workers from oppressed countries and depends on their labour. Material underdevelopment and the tailoring of production to provide exports for imperialist countries have prevented these countries' domestic production from fulfilling their own populations' needs. This generates markets for imperialist exports and levels of underemployment that create an international reserve army of labour that holds down

wages in oppressed countries and can be drawn on as needed by imperialist countries; workers who can be brought in when demand for labour is high and forced back to their home countries when demand falls. This benefits the capitalist class by allowing for fluctuations in demand brought about by the contradictory tendencies and periodic crises of capitalism.¹⁰ The scale of this international reserve army of labour can be assessed roughly by adding together the total number of workers in the world between the prime working ages of 25 and 54 who are unemployed, economically inactive or informally employed, all of whom would be available to be drawn into regular waged labour if capital had need for them. In 2011 people in these positions totaled 2.4 billion, compared to 1.4 billion in the active labour force.¹¹ This is a massive reserve army of labour, which benefits the capitalist classes but represents a huge waste of human potential.

It may be misleading to see a sharp distinction between refugees as 'forced migrants', and economic migrants as 'voluntary migrants'. In many cases migrant workers also have little choice but to leave their country of origin, because structural unemployment and underemployment leaves them with economic migration as their only option for survival.¹² The economic underdevelopment and impoverishment of oppressed countries increases the importance of remittances by migrant workers as a source of foreign currency, further increasing the pressure on families to send members to work abroad, and for those abroad to send remittances, often putting up with worse conditions of employment in order to do so.¹³ These remittances, which in some cases exceed a country's foreign exchange earnings from merchandise exports, provide foreign currency to buy further imports, simultaneously maintaining the underdevelopment of domestic production in oppressed countries and the demand for exports from companies based in imperialist countries, reinforcing relations of dependency.¹⁴

Enforcement of super-exploitation by authoritarian states

Imperialist countries have been experiencing an over-accumulation of capital since at least the 1960s, leading to insufficient opportunities to profitably invest all of the available capital.¹⁵ Countering this, investment opportunities in oppressed countries provided a vital outlet that combined with a massive expansion of credit to postpone a full-blown crisis of the capitalist system, although neither could do so indefinitely. Factors in oppressed countries that contribute to more profitable opportunities for investment frequently include weak environmental and planning controls, restrictions on trade unions, low wages, poor health and safety standards, and lax controls on tax and repatriation of profits.¹⁶ In some areas, conditions for profitable investment were fostered through institutions such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and International Monetary Fund (IMF), in others through direct or indirect military intervention. In some cases imperialist states, formally liberal and democratic 'at home', backed authoritarian regimes that were prepared and able to do whatever was necessary to prevent resistance from disrupting production, such as the governments of Augusto Pinochet in Chile, Suharto in Indonesia and Yoweri Museveni in Uganda;¹⁷

in other cases imperialist states used terrorism, assassination and destabilisation against 'uncooperative' states.¹⁸ Such measures, which are required for the super-exploitation of oppressed countries and continue today, have a horrific human cost and contribute to high rates of forced migration.

Inter-imperialist rivalries leading to war

maybe even if they pick a new president things will never change...People come from here [Britain], come from everywhere to steal our things, and they still send us back there, they know what is happening there...The minerals, coltan, diamond, gold, many things, they [the British ruling class] couldn't even...[let] people...get peace, because now [if] Congo gets peace...they [the Congolese people] will never let...[the British ruling class] go in there and take something [minerals] (refugee woman, arrived in Britain in 2002)

The dependence of the most powerful capitalist countries on investments abroad continues to necessitate competition on a national basis, ultimately leading to militarism and war. Powerful economic interests have been linked to the invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. Prior to the invasion of Iraq, its government had been making deals with China and Russia, and had begun to trade its oil in Euros. The jockeying that ensued between the major imperialist powers in the lead up to the war, rooted in struggles for strategic influence and opportunities for profit, underscored the continuing salience of inter-imperialist rivalries.¹⁹ In Afghanistan, the invasion was rapidly followed by the privatization and purchase by imperialist multinationals of the country's healthcare, water, electricity, oil, gas and mining.²⁰ In other cases, wars have not been carried out by imperialist states themselves, but by their proxies within oppressed countries. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), a United Nations report in 2002 found that 'high level political, military and business networks are stealing the DRC's mineral resources, and by 2002, they had transferred at least \$5 billion of assets from the state mining sector to private western companies, including 18 British firms such as Anglo American, DeBeers, Afrimex and Barclays Bank'. Under cover of a conflict with Rwanda that was presented as 'ethnic' in origin, exports of coltan, cassiterite, gold and diamonds increased five times, and fifteen flights a day were found to be leaving the DRC to transport these minerals to the European Union (EU) and US via Rwanda and South Africa.²¹

These contemporary rivalries are rooted in a fundamental shift in the balance of economic power between the major imperialist countries (Table 1 gives a selection of indicators).

Table 1 Economic indicators for United States and European Union in 2008²²

	US	EU

% of Global GDP	23.4%	30.2%
% of Global Exports	9.3%	13.7%
% of Global Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) Accumulated Stock	19.5%	49.9%

The size of the EU economies present a clear challenge to US dominance, but these relative economic strengths have not yet been translated into a corresponding shift in the balance of military and political power, and the US can be expected to do everything it can to prevent such a re-division of the world from happening. In the past, such re-divisions have only been achieved with horrific consequences for humanity. As David Yaffe points out:

‘It is important to remember that after the US replaced Britain as the strongest economic power, it took two world wars, the great depression and fascism before the US became the dominant global imperialist power.’²³

⁴ Hayes, D. (2005). 'Social Work with Asylum Seekers and Others Subject to Immigration Control', in *Social Work Futures: Crossing Boundaries, Transforming Practice*, edited by R. Adamset al. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 182-194.

⁵ Lenin, V. I. ([1916] 1975). *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. Moscow: Progress Publishers.

⁶ Dominelli, L. (2000). 'International Comparisons in Social Work', in *Innovative Education and Training for Care Professionals*, edited by R. Pierce and J. Weinstock. London: Jessica Kingsley,

⁷ Whitaker, S. (2006). 'The UK international investment position'. *Bank of England Quarterly Bulletin*(Q3), 290-296.

⁸ Foster, J. B., et al. (2011). 'The Global Reserve Army of Labor and the New Imperialism'. *Monthly Review*, 11(1), 1-31.

⁹ Madden, K. (2009). 'Coordinated Portfolio Investment Survey, 2002 to 2007'. *Economic and Labour Market Review*, 3(11), 16-23.

¹⁰ Miles, R. (1987). *Capitalism and Unfree Labour: Anomaly or necessity?* London: Tavistock Publications; Chinweizu, C. and N. Jameson (2008). 'Immigration and the reserve army of labour in Britain'. *Fight Racism! Fight Imperialism!*(201 February / March); Castells, M. ([1975] 2002). 'Immigrant Workers and Class Struggles in Advanced Capitalism: The Western European experience', in *The Castells Reader on Cities and Social Theory*, edited by I. Susser. Malden, MA: Blackwell,

¹¹ Foster, J. B., et al. (2011). 'The Global Reserve Army of Labor and the New Imperialism'. *Monthly Review*, 11(1), 1-31.

¹² Miles, R. and A. Phizacklea (1980). *Labour and Racism*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

¹³ Datta, K., et al. (2007). 'The new development finance or exploiting migrant labour? Remittance sending among low-paid migrant workers in London'. *International Development Planning Review*, 29(1), 43-67; Lindley, A. (2009). 'The early-morning phonecall: remittances from a refugee diaspora perspective'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 35(8), 1315-1334.

¹⁴ Small, J. (2007). 'Rethinking and unravelling the interlocking dynamics of caribbean emigration and return', in *Revitalising Communities in a Globalising World*, edited by L. Dominelli. London: Ashgate,

¹⁵ Yaffe, D. (2006). 'Britain: parasitic and decaying capitalism'. *Fight Racism! Fight Imperialism!*(194 December 2006 / January2007).

¹⁶ Cohen, R. (2006). *Migration and its Enemies: Global capital, migrant labour and the nation-state*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

¹⁷ Sivanandan, A. (1991). *A Different Hunger – Writings on Black Resistance*. London: Pluto Press.

¹⁸ Kundnani, A. (2007). *The End of Tolerance: Racism in 21st Century Britain*. London: Pluto Press.

¹⁹ Rayne, T. (2003). 'Inter-imperialist rivalry: a fight of hostile brothers'. *Fight Racism! Fight Imperialism!*(172 April / May).

²⁰ Perkins, J. (2004). *Confessions of an Economic Hitman*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler; Kundnani, A. (2007). *The End of Tolerance: Racism in 21st Century Britain*. London: Pluto Press.

²¹ UN Security Council. (2002). *Final report of the Panel of Experts on the Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources and Other Forms of Wealth of the Democratic Republic of the Congo*. New York; Kayembe, I. (2006). 'DR Congo: imperialists organise war and plunder'. *Fight Racism! Fight Imperialism!*(192 August / September).

²² Source: <http://www.wto.org> and UNCTAD. (2009). *World Investment Report*.

²³ Yaffe, D. (2006). 'Britain: parasitic and decaying capitalism'. *Fight Racism! Fight Imperialism!*(194 December 2006 / January 2007).

3. The international reserve army of labour

if you get status they are pressurising you...to find a paid job, otherwise you lose your benefits and you have to survive on something (refugee without status from Iran)

At the same time as conditions of underdevelopment, state repression and war place pressure on people from oppressed countries to move, the states of imperialist and other capitalist countries bring in restrictions to regulate peoples' movement according to the needs of capital. The international division of labour, and the super-exploitation it enables, depends on workers' immobility.²⁴ Within imperialist countries, the international reserve army of labour cushions employers against shocks by providing a flexible and mobile labour force, while also enabling a higher rate of exploitation and profit through systematic discrimination, denial of rights and harassment of ethnic minority labour.²⁵ Migrant workers in low-skilled jobs frequently only have temporary rights to remain, insecure contractual arrangements, and experience exploitative practices including non-payment or underpayment of wages, unauthorised deductions, non-compliance with health and safety, long working hours and overcrowded, unsafe or otherwise unsuitable housing.²⁶ The costs of migrants' labour power is subsidised by their countries' of origin, as John Berger and Jean Mohr put it:

*'They are not born: they are not brought up: they do not age: they do not get tired: they do not die. They have a single function – to work. All other functions of their lives are the responsibility of the country they come from.'*²⁷

For many workers this includes the initial costs of training and education, and the costs of care during periods when they are not engaged in wage labour, during infancy and old age, which are unproductive from the point of view of capital.

Racism in Britain

I loved that country [England] before I came here, I loved the football here, and news about England...When I came here I'm very glad...99% of people [are] very kind and very good...British government is- first year I came here is everything ok and every year [they] make [things] a little bit too difficult for asylum seeker...especially for court, and finding solicitor, interpreter or everything...because my case is closed, you can't come in and study in the colleges...I can't speak very well, that is too much problem (refugee man, arrived in Britain in 2000)

Liza Schuster argues that Britain has a history of constructing asylum policy in response to non-existent or false evidence,²⁸ which forces us to question the real drivers behind policy. In the domestic policy context Lucinda Platt points out that approaches by Labour governments, under the banners of 'combating exclusion' and 'building social capital', failed to account for how geographical concentrations of deprivation and ethnic density do not occur 'naturally', 'but are themselves shaped by policy decisions and opportunity structures'.²⁹

Understanding the context for refugees and other migrants in Britain today can be aided by a historical perspective. Imperialist states have always been ready to acknowledge the positive value of immigration when it is under their control and benefits their labour markets, but when it is 'spontaneous', or out of their control, they express alarm.³⁰ Following the second world war the British state actively recruited from its former colonies to staff the expanded state welfare services and to undertake low-paid work in areas of light industry such as textiles, increasing profitability. As demand for low-skilled labour began to be satisfied, the state passed the 1962 Immigration Act, allowing entry only to relatively skilled or qualified workers, or those with jobs waiting for them.³¹ Since then, there has been a succession of further acts, which have contributed to the composition of ethnic minority populations, with a decrease in primary immigration from Britain's former colonies. The contemporary situation for many black people born in Britain has been described as 'integrated yet alienated'. Their situation is characterised by weakening links to the countries members of their families migrated from and the highest rate of 'mixed race' marriages of any imperialist country, alongside rising levels of racism in areas such as the labour market.³² This is the contradiction within calls for refugees to integrate,³³ when the terms of integration assign a subordinate position for the majority of black people. Deeply entrenched racism within Britain reflects the dominant and parasitic relation of Britain to the countries refugees flee. It is the role of the British state to 'manage' this contradiction, in order to maintain the smooth running of the imperialist system.

The role of migrants in the British economy

The cheap job, the shitty job, and they're all...[being done by] migrants, I mean the British people would not do that, I mean they need migrants...England's been built on migrants. (refugee man, arrived in Britain in 2001)

Part of the benefit of migrant workers for the capitalist classes is that they give flexibility to the national workforce – they can be brought in when there is a boom and demand for labour is high, and laid off when demand falls, often with fewer rights to complain and under pressure to leave the country instead of accessing state benefits. Without migrant labour, it has been argued that British agriculture could not continue in its present form.³⁴ For example, in 2008 farmers in some parts of Britain complained that food was being left to rot in the fields as a result of new restrictions imposed on migrant labour from parts of Eastern Europe.³⁵ State welfare in Britain also continues to be highly dependent on migrant labour. Numbers of work permits issued to healthcare staff from outside the EU rose 27 times between 1993 and 2003. 15,000 of the 20,000 nurses who joined the medical register in 2003–2004 came from overseas and one third of doctors on the register qualified abroad.³⁶ In 2001–2002 overseas-trained social workers accounted for around a quarter of all new social work recruits, and between 2003 and 2004, there was an 82% increase in numbers of trained social workers coming to the UK, with the largest number from outside the EU. Zimbabwe has lost half of its trained social workers to the UK, resulting in severe shortages in

Zimbabwe's own welfare provision.³⁷ There is substantial involvement of migrant workers in delivering social care, with one study suggesting one fifth of all care workers looking after older people are migrant workers, and 28% of those recruited in 2007, many of whom are employed by agencies. The care sector is outside the jurisdiction of the Gangmaster Licensing Authority and exploitation is rife, including excessive hours, rates of pay below the minimum wage, deception about expected wage levels, little to no holiday, and cases of debt-bondage.³⁸

2004 saw a significant development in freedom of movement and employment – though not necessarily access to state support in case of hardship – for citizens of the 'A8' countries in Eastern and Central Europe, with the further addition of the 'A2' countries, Romania and Bulgaria, in 2007. Kavita Datta et al. suggest A8 workers may have been a preferred source of labour, both for their 'whiteness' and on the understanding that they would be more likely to return to their country of origin than people who had travelled greater distances.³⁹ The Workers Registration Scheme (WRS) was established, in the words of the Home Office, to provide 'transitional measures to regulate A8 nationals' access to the labour market...and to restrict access to benefits',⁴⁰ and remained in effect until April 2011. In the first quarter of 2010, 71% of requests by A8 workers for tax-funded, income-related benefits were refused. While on the WRS, migrants had severely restricted access to unemployment, child and housing benefits. This gave these migrant workers a distinct relationship to capital, to the benefit of the ruling class, going some way to explain their preference for A8 and A2 workers over refugees, who, once they are granted refugee status, have far greater rights to remain in Britain and access state support.⁴¹ In 2007, there were an estimated 1.4 million registered migrant workers in the UK, around half of whom had arrived from the A8 and A2 countries since 2004, and somewhere between 300,000 and 800,000 unregistered migrant workers. Even for those who are registered, many work in conditions so exploitative as to meet the international definition of 'forced labour'.⁴²

Gender and migration

While it is beyond the scope of this pamphlet to deal with this question in detail, it is important to note that experiences of migration and settlement are powerfully gendered. Under capitalism women perform a disproportionate amount of unpaid work and experience inferior pay and conditions for paid work. This is enforced through discriminatory attitudes and violence, and interacts with oppression on the basis of country of origin and immigration status to produce conditions facing women refugees that are more than simply 'gender plus racism'. Within recent popular typologies of migration to Britain, women have been largely invisible. The economic migrant is usually constructed as young, male and highly mobile, either without a family or sending money to 'dependents' in their country of origin.⁴³ The asylum seeker has also often been presented as young and male, although in this case idle in unemployment, and frequently a sexual predator after young white women, who are also portrayed in a passive role as victims.⁴⁴ Gender violence has frequently been discounted as a legitimate grounds for asylum, ignoring the penetration of the state

into domestic relationships and the way that state policies create the conditions for violence in both sending and receiving contexts.⁴⁵ Where women have featured as migrants in dominant discourses, it has often been in the context of racist fears of population growth of migrant communities, whether through ‘family reunification’ with migrant workers or refugee families who are depicted as a drain on welfare resources. In all of these roles, women who migrate from oppressed countries to Britain are portrayed as passive, dependent on either a male family member or the British state, and contributing nothing.

In reality, women have migrated to and from Britain for centuries, with varying degrees of control over their lives, but always as political actors. Migrant women and their descendants have played leading roles in struggles across diverse public arenas, including the workplace, with the Grunwick strike from 1976–78 in Willesden, London, just one of the more famous,⁴⁶ and the Gate Gourmet strike in 2005 at Heathrow Airport one of the more recent.⁴⁷ They have faced particular forms of harassment and degrading treatment by the state, including the use of ‘virginity tests’ at Heathrow Airport in the 1970s.⁴⁸ Before paid work was prohibited for all refugees without status in 2002, it had already been prohibited for many refugee women since 1996, on the basis that only a family’s ‘primary claimant’ for asylum was entitled to seek work, and this was often a male member of the family.⁴⁹ More recently, requirements have been imposed for women to pass English language tests in order to move to Britain to join family members, at the same time as changes to funding and charges for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes have reduced women’s access to lessons. Women have also played an active role in refugee organisations of all kinds.⁵⁰ For refugees with children in Britain, caring responsibilities often make the prospect of avoiding deportation by living ‘underground’ even more difficult; this may be a contributory factor to the high levels of participation of women refugees with young children in many public campaigns.

²⁴ Foster, J. B., et al. (2011). 'The Global Reserve Army of Labor and the New Imperialism'. *Monthly Review*, 11(1), 1-31.

²⁵ Sivanandan, A. (1974). *Race and Resistance - The IRR Story*. London: Race Today Publications; RCG, R. C. G. (1979). *The Anti-Nazi League and the Struggle Against Racism*. London: RCG Publications; Castells, M. ([1975] 2002). 'Immigrant Workers and Class Struggles in Advanced Capitalism: The Western European experience', in *The Castells Reader on Cities and Social Theory*, edited by I. Susser. Malden, MA: Blackwell,

²⁶ Piper, N. (2010). 'Temporary economic migration and rights activism: an organizational perspective'. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 33(1), 108-125.

²⁷ Berger, J. and J. Mohr (1975). *A Seventh Man: the story of a migrant worker in Europe*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

²⁸ Schuster, L. (2003). *The Use and Abuse of Political Asylum*. London: Frank Cass Publishers; Crawley, H. (2010). *Chance or choice? Understanding why asylum seekers come to the UK*. London: Refugee Council.

²⁹ Platt, L. (2009). 'Social activity, social isolation and ethnicity'. *The Sociological Review*, 57(4), 670-702.

³⁰ Borjas, G. J. and J. Crisp, Eds. (2005). *Poverty, International Migration and Asylum*. Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan.

³¹ Williams, F. (1992). *Social Policy: A Critical Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity.

³² Williams, L. (2007). "Home Alone", in *Revitalising Communities in a Globalising World*, edited by L. Dominelli. London: Ashgate, 255-270.

³³ Kostakopoulou, D. (2010). 'Matters of control: integration tests, naturalisation reform and probationary citizenship in the United Kingdom'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 36(5), 829-846.

- ³⁴ Craig, G. (2007b). 'They come over here...and boost our economy: The impact of migrant workers on Yorkshire and Humber region'. *Yorkshire and Humber Regional Review*, 17(1), 33-35.
- ³⁵ Surman, W. (2008), 13 June. 'Government silent as food rots across the UK'. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.farmersguardian.com/government-silent-as-food-rots-across-uk/18435.article> [accessed: 30 December].
- ³⁶ Kyriakides, C. and S. Virdee (2003). 'Migrant labour, racism and the British National Health Service'. *Ethnicity and Health*, 8(4), 283-305; Jameson, N. (2005). 'The reality of capitalism's immigration policy'. *Fight Racism! Fight Imperialism!*(185 June / July).
- ³⁷ Welbourne, P., et al. (2007). 'Social work in the UK and the global labour market: recruitment, practice and ethical considerations'. *International Social Work*, 50(1), 27-40.
- ³⁸ Wilkinson, M., et al. (2009). *Turning the Tide: How to best protect workers employed by gangmasters, five years after Morecambe Bay*. Oxford.
- ³⁹ Datta, K., et al. (2007). 'The new development finance or exploiting migrant labour? Remittance sending among low-paid migrant workers in London'. *International Development Planning Review*, 29(1), 43-67.
- ⁴⁰ Home Office. (2010). *Control of Immigration: Quarterly Statistical Summary, United Kingdom January-March 2010*. London.
- ⁴¹ Chinweizu, C. (2006). 'Asylum and immigration: maximising Britain's economy'. *Fight Racism! Fight Imperialism!*(190 June/July).
- ⁴² Craig, G., et al. (2007). *Contemporary Slavery in the UK*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation; Ahmad, A. N. (2008). 'The labour market consequences of human smuggling: 'illegal' employment in London's migrant economy'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 34(6), 853-874.
- ⁴³ Palmary, I., et al., Eds. (2010). *Gender and Migration: Feminist interventions*. London, Zed Books.
- ⁴⁴ For discussion of related issues see Psaroudakis, S. N. (2010). 'An arm hanging in mid-air: a discussion on immigrant men and impossible relationships in Greece', in *Gender and Migration: Feminist interventions*, edited by I. Palmary et al. London: Zed Books, 196-214.
- ⁴⁵ Chantler, K. (2010). 'Women seeking asylum in the UK: contesting conventions', in *Gender and Migration: Feminist interventions*, edited by I. Palmary et al. London: Zed Books, 86-103; Kiwanuka, M. (2010). 'For love or survival: migrant women's narratives of survival and intimate partner violence in Johannesburg', in *Gender and Migration: Feminist interventions*, edited by I. Palmary et al. London: Zed Books,
- ⁴⁶ Davidson, S. (2011). 'Jayaben Desai 1933-2010'. *Fight Racism! Fight Imperialism!*(219 Feb / March).
- ⁴⁷ Eskovitchl, J. (2005). 'Gate Gourmet at Heathrow union undermines workers' solidarity'. *Fight Racism! Fight Imperialism!*(187 Oct / Nov).
- ⁴⁸ Smith, E. and M. Marmo (2011). 'Uncovering the 'Virginity Testing' Controversy in the National Archives: The Intersectionality of Discrimination in British Immigration History'. *Gender and History*, 23(1), 147-165.
- ⁴⁹ Dumper, H. (2002). *Missed Opportunities: A Skills Audit of Refugee Women in the Teaching, Nursing and Medical Professions*. London.
- ⁵⁰ WLRI. (2005). *Women refugees - from volunteers to employees: a research project on paid and unpaid work in the voluntary sector and volunteering as a pathway into employment*. London: Working Lives Research Institute.

4. The political role of the asylum system

obviously [the] government target is for controlling immigration, and to control asylum and refugees, to stop them coming in here...now if your asylum claim is rejected they stop your benefit and they evict you from your house...the main reason I think is to discourage people who are not in Britain, and who intend to come to Britain...because the news spreads fast...[that] you get homeless, you don't get status, and obviously it has an impact on other people and discourage them from coming to Britain...The other reason is to change [the minds of] people who are already here to [force them to] get back to their country...I've seen people who prefer to live in their own countries, within war zones or difficult situations, but not stay here and be destitute or lose their reputation...I've seen people from Iran, from Baghdad, who is still under heavy control of the military, they prefer to go back (refugee man, arrived in Britain in 2000)

Within the international division of labour outlined above, refugees pose an implicit threat, both because they bring experiences of some of the worst consequences of imperialist exploitation in oppressed countries to within the imperialist heartland and because they move regardless of demand for their labour. This threatens the smooth-running of imperialism, creating pressure for the British state to take action to reimpose the labour market discipline of the international reserve army of labour. As the metaphor implies, once refugees have 'put down roots' in Britain, with access to resources and networks of support, they are in a stronger position to resist the demands of the capitalist state and employers. Refugees' ability to put down roots and rebuild their lives in Britain was increasingly obstructed from 1999 by policy interventions, which combined to undermine resistance to being re-incorporated into international divisions of labour on terms that benefit British capital. Key interventions included increased use of immigration detention, forced dispersal across Britain, a prohibition on paid work, and an asylum decision-making process seemingly set up to fail all but the luckiest and most resourceful refugees. These policies need to be viewed in the light of wider efforts over the same period to tailor migration ever more tightly to the needs of British capital, justified through a discourse of 'managed migration' and a policy strategy outlined in the 2005 White Paper *Controlling Our Borders: Making migration work for Britain*, which set out a system of four tiers ranking 'highly-skilled' English-speaking migrants above 'low-skilled', non-English speaking workers, and only allowing settlement after two years for the top two tiers.⁵¹ This was further refined with the introduction of the Points-Based System in 2008, which has been retained by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government but combined with a 'cap' on migrant numbers which has been used to justify even more aggressive policing of migration.

Detention

I'm always depressed, every day, because I'm always thinking we don't even know what is going to happen tomorrow, and sometimes you get some people

being snatched by immigration officers...you're always in fear, at night, even if you hear any sound you are scared, maybe it is them coming for you (refugee from Zimbabwe, arrived in Britain in 2006)

By the time the Labour Party left office in 2010 it had expanded the capacity of immigration detention to over 3,000, among the largest in Europe. The most common category of detainees in 2010 was people who had sought asylum.⁵² Nick Gill found that regular movement of detainees between centres disrupted their attempts to build networks, and left little opportunity to form relationships with non-detainees, either with detention centre staff or local support and activist organisations. This encouraged attitudes toward detainees as fundamentally transient and facilitated the dehumanisation of detainees as passive objects to be 'managed', with evidence that those trying to complain or organise were particularly liable to be transferred.⁵³

Dispersal

no services were set up to welcome [refugees who were dispersed]...just a person in the council who was dealing with that issue, he said 'Ok, we have some void [empty] houses'...and unfortunately most of the asylum seekers have been put in the most deprived areas, even the voided houses [which] no...British [people would] accept...So there were...cultural barriers [and] a lack of services, even an organisation...to welcome those people (refugee from DRC, arrived in Britain in 2002)

Refugees without status were forcibly dispersed to towns and cities across Britain from 1999 (although there are earlier historical precedents), with no choice over where they were sent. Areas for dispersal were often selected primarily on the basis of cheap or vacant housing. This reflects refugees' status as presently unwanted members of the reserve army of labour, who capital has no place for within Britain. Tony Jefferson argues that prior to the First World War the large numbers of casually employed workers in Britain required more directly oppressive policing in order to maintain stable capitalist accumulation.⁵⁴ Similarly, in the recent period the presence of refugees within the imperialist heartlands has posed a threat to the consensual maintenance of capitalism. Significantly in the context of imperialism, the existence of coherent and self-conscious diasporas with a sense of shared identity between immigrants in imperialist countries and their oppressed countries of origin, rather than with the national ruling class of their new home, poses a threat to national borders on both an ideological and practical level.⁵⁵ Dispersal has played a role in countering this threat in a number of ways, by physically separating refugees with status from those without, by separating refugees without status from the rest of society, and by separating refugees without status from one another, often just at the point that they were beginning to form new relationships.⁵⁶ Refugees' lack of control over where they are dispersed has contributed to particular problems of isolation for some refugees. For example, women's refugees have been given inconsistent responses by UKBA about whether resources are available to move refugee women who are experiencing domestic violence at the location where they have been dispersed.⁵⁷ The British state

has no interest in refugees remaining in Britain, because they are driven by imperatives that override demand for their labour, and consequently the state has little interest in providing any but the most basic means of survival. The state has even less interest in helping refugees without status to integrate with other working class people. Such integration could both offer solidarity for refugees' attempts to remain in Britain and advance their rights, and fundamentally threaten the divisions amongst workers of different countries, which imperialism relies on to undermine resistance to the super-exploitation of oppressed countries. By disrupting connections with other refugees, support networks and other sections of workers, the dispersal system has undermined the potential for collective resistance and increased pressure for refugees to accept the positions assigned them within the international division of labour.

The right to work

I was granted [leave to remain], now I'm happy, I know that I can get a job, I can work and do whatever I want...it was one year since I got it, 2007...I applied for the care assistant [job]...I'm still waiting, but I know that I will [get a job], because I don't get enough money for me and my son, so I don't want to be...on benefits, I want to work (refugee woman, arrived in Britain in 2002)

The vast majority of refugees without status have been prohibited from taking paid work since 2002. In the accounts of refugees I interviewed, the experience of being a refugee, particularly one who has not been granted some form of 'leave to remain' by the state, was strongly characterised by insecurity and dependency on the state, which was enforced by the prohibition on paid work:

'the asylum seeker is limited, he's not allowed to work...his income is very low, and he doesn't know the outcome of his decision, so any time he can be deported or can be accepted, so he is in limbo' (arrived 2002)

This insecurity, and the legal restrictions on many kinds of action which might have improved their situation, contributed to an intense sense of dependency:

'I've always been independent...but now it's as if I'm in prison...there's nothing that proves that I'm an adult, I am just at home, just wait[ing] for somebody to give [things to me]' (Cameroon, arrived 2008)

For many refugees without status, the combination of a prohibition on paid work and at best poverty-level benefits creates pressure to work illegally as the only option for survival, which both leaves them open to exploitation and increases their vulnerability to the state, as they thereby become classified as 'foreign criminals' and liable to deportation on that basis. By coming to Britain under imperatives other than the labour market, refugees have broken discipline with the reserve army of labour. Asylum policies thus combine to disempower refugees and enforce their dependency on the British state, which weakens their resistance to accepting the discipline of the reserve army of labour by giving up their rights-based demand for asylum. This both keeps them in an oppressed position, and manages this situation by enforcing compliance with the terms of their oppression. The British state carries this out in the interests of the capitalist class as a whole, even when this involves fines and other

sanctions against individual capitalists when they employ migrants who are prohibited from paid work.

The asylum decision-making process

they [immigration officials] will ask you, do you have any evidence, but that's [like] asking...if there is an earthquake now, suddenly, and you want to save your life, will you take your qualification, will you take your I.D....? No, the important thing will be for you to save your life, and then maybe you'll be going back to your house and search for these important things. So that is what happens to asylum seekers. When they came first, maybe they have been persecuted and they don't have enough time to take all of these things, [they just] want to be safe. Even some people who are lucky, when they come with these documents, they [immigration officials] will just say 'No...[these documents are] fake (refugee from DRC, arrived in Britain in 2005)

Policies of detention, dispersal and prohibition of paid work are framed and given added force by the asylum decision-making process itself. The refugees I interviewed in Newcastle presented a picture of the asylum process as unreasonable, unclear and unjust. Nationally, in the first quarter of 2010 76% of asylum applications were refused at their first hearing, and 68% of appeals against previous refusals were also rejected. This is in a context where 93% of applications for other forms of settlement during the same period were granted.⁵⁸ The charity Bail for Immigration Detainees suggest that UK asylum policies are implicitly based around a highly unrealistic 'model' refugee, who 'arrives in the UK with their identity documents, declares to the immigration authorities "I would like to make a claim for asylum under the 1951 Refugee Convention", and hands over a dossier of evidence in support of their claim'. When real refugees fail to live up to this model they face detention, and experiences reported to include 'confusion, misinformation, bad advice, fear and shock that they had ended up incarcerated'.⁵⁹ A fog of complexity and bureaucracy covers up for the fact that a process which is 'fair' in formal terms is in practice set up to fail all but a few, regardless of their need. This fulfills two related but contradictory needs of imperialism, which shape the management of refugees' oppression. On the one hand, the likelihood of being refused asylum reinforces the absolute priority accorded to capital's demand for labour as the basis for migrants to live in Britain, which is necessary for the continuation of the imperialist division of labour. On the other hand, the formal fairness of the system maintains the British state's image as an upholder of universal human rights and liberty, which is necessary for the claims to moral authority that have frequently been used to justify imperialist interference and domination of other countries.

Refugees occupy an intermediate class status, particularly acute while their cases are under consideration. They are part of the reserve army of labour, but a 'part out of place' because they reject labour market demand as the sole criteria for their mobility, with a potential to disrupt the normal functioning of the international division of labour on a political as well as an economic level. Their trajectory is in most cases from

countries oppressed on a national basis, with which they may maintain connections in identity, communication and transfer of resources. Their present position is among the poorest sections of the working class in Britain, sharing living conditions which hold the potential to forge alliances across racialised divisions. From 1999, government policy specifically mitigated against this, using dispersal to break up existing networks based on refugees' countries of origin, and impeding the formation of new networks based on common elements of class position within Britain, through a prohibition on paid work, reducing opportunities for contact with other working class people. With the exception of individuals who 'escape' the collective position of the majority, for example through paid employment in the refugee sector, the trajectory of most refugees after arrival in Britain is either inclusion into a more regularised but super-exploited section of the working class in Britain if they are granted leave to remain, occupying the worst paid and most insecure jobs, or for those who are refused leave to remain, even more exploitative work in the informal economy or deportation back to the situations they have fled.

⁵¹ Cheong, P. H., et al. (2007). 'Immigration, social cohesion and social capital: a critical review'. *Critical Social Policy*, 27(1), 24-49.

⁵² Silverman, S. J. (2011). *Immigration Detention in the UK*. Oxford: The Migration Observatory.

⁵³ Gill, N. (2009). 'Governmental mobility: the power effects of the movement of detained asylum seekers around Britain's detention estate'. *Political Geography*, 28(3), 186-196.

⁵⁴ Jefferson, T. (1991). 'Discrimination, disadvantage and police work', in *Out of Order? Policing black people*, edited by E. Cashmore and E. McLaughlin. London: Routledge,

⁵⁵ Gilroy, P. (2001). *Against Race: Imagining political culture beyond the color line*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

⁵⁶ Hynes, P. (2009). 'Contemporary compulsory dispersal and the absence of space for the restoration of trust'. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 22(1), 97-121.

⁵⁷ Chantler, K. (2010). 'Women seeking asylum in the UK: contesting conventions', in *Gender and Migration: Feminist interventions*, edited by I. Palmariet al. London: Zed Books, 86-103.

⁵⁸ Home Office. (2010). *Control of Immigration: Quarterly Statistical Summary, United Kingdom January-March 2010*. London.

⁵⁹ BID. (2009). *Out of sight, out of mind: experiences of immigration detention in the UK*. London: Bail for Immigration Detainees.

5. Responses

among us, the refugee asylum seeking community, there are a lot of issues which needed to be addressed, and we didn't know how to do it...language barriers, cultural problems and related issues, asylum process, a lot of things...The other side of our time is when you try to help your fellow comrade, your fellow countrymen, not only countrymen, but people in the same situation [as refugees] (refugee man, arrived in Britain in 2002)

Responses to the problems refugees face have been complex, contradictory and multi-layered, including those responses by refugees themselves. Since the early 1990s, refugee community organisations have been increasingly incorporated into the race relations framework of devolved responsibility from the state, with its discipline of funding regimes,⁶⁰ and numerous voluntary sector projects specifically targeting refugees have been established across Britain.⁶¹ The Home Office has stated that it views strong refugee organisations and 'involvement in the host society' as positive signs of integration, and has actively encouraged voluntary work by refugees who have been granted status.⁶² In some cases, refugee sector organisations have effectively become part of the delivery of the state's punitive immigration system. While some voluntary sector organisations publicly criticised the dispersal system, there was no sustained campaign, and organisations from the voluntary sector, and in some cases Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs), ultimately took the front line in implementing dispersal, sacrificing much of their independence from the state and inhabiting 'the most visible and contested space within the NASS system' and its intended role as a deterrent to residence in Britain.⁶³ Linda Briskman and Sarah Cemlyn conducted interviews with a range of asylum teams and voluntary agencies and concluded:

*'There is a mixed picture among those [NGOs in Britain] with government funding between maintaining independence and advocacy on behalf of asylum-seekers' rights, and becoming enmeshed in managing an unsatisfactory situation. Individual workers, statutory and voluntary, seek to make a difference, but provision is under-resourced and uncoordinated, leaving basic needs unmet.'*⁶⁴

Histories of resistance

sometimes you will see someone [a refugee without status] saying 'You see, [people from your country], they will not deport you, your case is strong', but it's not true. My role is not just to tell to them [that it] is not true, we are still in danger. But also to explain to them when someone is doing this kind of thing to you, even [though] you are an asylum seeker...you still have your rights in this country. So for example if you are entitled to have accommodation, you need to have a suitable accommodation. (refugee woman, arrived in Britain in 2005)

The context for increased attention to refugee organisations by the state was resistance by refugees and their supporters against the actions of the state, particularly in opposition to deportations and also, at times, targeting the use of

vouchers for subsistence payments and the practice of immigration detention.⁶⁵ From the mid-1980s, the Viraj Mendis Defence Campaign and other high profile campaigns against the deportations of particular individuals drew wide support, engaged in active street campaigning, formed alliances with people engaged in other anti-racist and working-class struggles, and received backing from trade union branches, religious leaders and some Members of Parliament.⁶⁶ In Newcastle, such campaigns included opposition to the deportation of Surjit Singh Lally away from his family to India in 1988, in a campaign involving Benwell Law Centre and supported by local MP David Clelland, which collected more than 6000 signatures and won one year leave to remain in Britain, after which he could apply for permanent leave to remain.⁶⁷ In 1994, the Tahir family in nearby Blyth were deported to Pakistan despite a campaign supported by thousands of people, including 170 MPs, but later managed to return to Britain and were granted the right to stay permanently.⁶⁸ In 1998, protests against the deportation of Greg Otigbah to Nigeria, which involved 'Youth Against Racism in Europe', forced the transfer of the flight from Newcastle to Teeside airport.⁶⁹ On 30 September 2000, the North East Campaign for Asylum Rights (NECFAR) organised a march through Newcastle from the quayside to a rally in the Bigg Market, involving local, national and international campaign groups and trade unions.⁷⁰ In 2004, the Croatian Bamburac family, who had come to live in Newcastle in 1998 and had been refused their asylum application in 2003, secured the right to stay following a campaign and petition submitted by MP Nick Brown signed by 1,400 'friends and neighbours'.⁷¹ These examples, which represent just some of the most public manifestations of ongoing resistance, demonstrate the recurring difficulties experienced by the state in trying to implement its immigration controls in the face of organised community-based opposition, even in areas with relatively small numbers of migrants, where it might be thought there would be fewer opportunities for solidarity.

As the numbers dispersed to different areas increased and networks developed and matured, so did forms of resistance. For example, Eskovitchl⁷² reports collective resistance to deportations of refugees in working-class communities in Glasgow, including community patrols to look out for immigration raids. Many of the refugees arriving in Britain in the late 1990s and early 2000s came from a greater diversity of countries than earlier periods of migration from former colonies in South Asia and the Caribbean, and in some cases were dispersed to different parts of Britain than earlier migrants. As a result, they were often outside the scope of established 'race relations' structures that the state had nurtured over decades to 'manage' black people's responses to racism. This was a contradictory consequence of refugees' marginalisation, as they were excluded from vital rights, services and official political channels, but were also less liable to have their struggles immediately neutralised and their leaders co-opted. With a peak between 2005 and 2008, refugees across Britain began to mobilise in a new wave of collective opposition to deportations, often around a shared country of origin, including in Newcastle significant mobilisations at different points by groups of refugees from the DRC, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Côte d'Ivoire, Cameroon, Iran, Turkey and Iraq, sometimes organising together with non-refugees,

for example as part of Tyneside Community Action for Refugees, and sometimes in separate organisations, some of which were directly connected to opposition parties or other organisations in refugees' countries of origin. These mobilisations took place at a time of transition in the dominant approach of the state to ethnic minorities, from limited recognition, mostly in terms of cultural difference, to a harder-edged assimilationism, which provoked political and conflictual forms of mobilisation. Some mobilisations by members of 'new' migration flows began to link ethnicity to class and gender, such as in collective resistance among immigration detainees and in organisation within low-paid and insecure workplaces.⁷³ Such connections have a long history, but had not been prevalent in the recent period in Britain. These new migrant mobilisations posed a distinct threat to the state because of their potential to form alliances with other sections of the working class, and as a consequence received special attention from the state in order to neutralise their struggles.

The delegation of governance to the voluntary sector

We have some difficulties sometimes, especially...the new ones in the city. You can advise them, you can help them, but the barrier of language, sometimes they have to come back to you all the time...it's a kind of hard thing (refugee man, arrived in Britain in 2002)

For voluntary and community sector organizations working with refugees, the lack of funding and the need to make the best possible use of available resources increased pressure to recruit voluntary labour.⁷⁴ In the voluntary and community sector more widely, under Labour governments from 1997 there was a trend towards the replacement of a 'volunteering ethos' by a managerialism favouring work by paid and contracted professionals. This existed in tension with a continued reliance on volunteers, prompted both by a lack of resources and by their importance as a link to the communities organisations seek to engage. John Morison suggests a dominant approach to resolving this contradiction was to reconceptualise 'the community as a mobilising focus for collective action in a way that links 'the sturdy "self-reliance" of the past' (drawing upon nostalgia for traditional working-class communities) with the "active citizenry" of community action in the present'.⁷⁵ This has now been increased further through the massive cuts to funding for the voluntary and public sectors, and the ideology of the 'Big Society' promising voluntary action as a replacement. In the case of the refugee sector, this contributed to a situation where the wider pressures acting on refugees as clients, volunteers and staff kept the work as a whole under constant pressure and instability, and severely limited the potential for support and development.⁷⁶

My research in Newcastle included case studies of four organizations that occupied different positions along a continuum from direct delivery of state contracts, through organizations with a more ambiguous relationship to the state, to those engaged in outright opposition to the state's policies. Organisations are indicated by anonymized acronyms: VOL, a voluntary sector project delivering contracts for the Home Office alongside a range of other activities; COM, a community advice and signposting project

established by refugees; CHUR, a church-based project delivering signposting, advice and hardship support; and CAMP, an asylum rights campaign group. COM provides a case where a lack of preparation by the state prior to dispersal led refugees without status to actively engage with the state in an attempt to deal with hostile elements of the local population:

‘our phone used to ring even at 2am, someone [who had] just been attacked by their neighbour used to call, we had to do something, we had to...force ourselves to be known to the local authorities, I’m talking about the police, especially the police...prior to the dispersal programme the government did not prepare the region...it was like how many beds can you prepare, oh a hundred beds, phew, and people were found in an area where there were no connections, the local community were not prepared for that, and so that’s why [there were] those funny stories about asylum seekers, they have nice phones, whatever.’ (COM management committee member 1)

Yet even with this trust and willingness to engage with the state, the same project found limits to how far up the state hierarchy they were permitted access, and a lack of trust from the state to the point where Home Office representatives would not set foot in the centre:

‘we don’t deal directly with the government, the government always uses its local representation, its regional representation...and the regional representation [are] using other services to reach us. It’s very rare to have a direct link – I remember one year, I think it was 2005, there were a group of directors from the Home Office, they were touring in the different regions...they came, but they didn’t want to come in, they were just in the bus, so we had to go in the bus!’ (COM management committee member 1)

This limitation of refugees’ ‘linking’ role, to within boundaries set by the state as the ‘partner’ with greater power, was echoed in reports by refugees volunteering that indicate the disempowering impact of acting as a ‘messenger’ for the real decision-makers:

‘we don’t have any power like the government to decide on their behalf...We have no power.’ (COM management committee member 2)

‘[Being] support workers means that we’re not legal representation, and we are not the decision maker...we’re taking the client’s enquiry and everything to the Home Office, and we’re taking the Home Office decision...to the client, and basically we explain to the client what...the Home Office are saying, what’s their policy, what’s their law. And we’re sending the client’s [documents]...to the Home Office.’ (VOL volunteer 4)

Yet despite this lack of power on the part of volunteers, participants reported the practical linking roles played by VOL as reaching a point where any distinction between VOL and the state was absent in the eyes of some users:

‘I’ve found actually the role of [VOL] very, very useful, just like a bridge. You know, it’s just like the medium, whatever problem people bring in...they’ll take

it on, and they'll try, and they try to link up with anybody, with the Home Office...some people think maybe it's the Home Office.' (VOL volunteer 5)

A recurring theme across different projects was the importance of winning trust through dialogue and the example of organisations' actions, in order to overcome divisions and build effective collective action. One participant from COM explained the organisation's initial challenge of winning the trust and understanding of other refugees:

'people used to find it strange...there were some misconceptions among the community...that [we were] getting the money from the public funds [and were making money from the project], and we had to explain all the time. But the goodness of what we are doing, beside the explanation, we were showing the work. So we were accountable for whatever work we were doing. And that made us to be strong at a certain point.' (COM management committee member 1)

Several refugees I interviewed who were engaged in more oppositional forms of action suggested that VOL's close relationship with the state seriously compromised that organisation's relationship to refugees, constituting a weakening of trust between refugees and VOL as the price for the level of engagement between VOL and the state:

'[VOL] isn't really a group that I particularly trust...because for me it's just another face of the Home Office.' (Ivory Coast, arrived 2000)

Several refugees, most prominently those volunteering with VOL but extending to volunteers at other projects, reported dilemmas arising from the tension between their position as a refugee and their desire to defend the interests of other refugees, and the requirements in their organisational role to act as a bridge to the state:

'We can't be more supportive of clients than supportive of the Home Office, we're supposed to be in the middle, but sometimes when you see how the Home Office is trying to make it really hard for people...it's really hard to stay detached...knowing how hard it is for people sometimes you just say 'Oh, forget it' and you really try to help people...here people are just in charge of other people's lives, because it's so important, like one wrong move can just wreck someone's life...you're always under pressure and tension.' (VOL volunteer 2)

The tension described above may be understood as arising from the attempt to 'bridge' between interests that stand in objective contradiction to one another, in this case the interests of refugees without status on the one hand and the interests of the British state on the other, and behind it the British capitalist class. Thus, by operating through delegated and 'partner' NGOs, the British state has been able to both maintain engagement of many refugees despite their deep mistrust of the state itself, and at the same time to define the acceptable limits within which refugees may organise in defence of their interests.⁷⁷ One thing that has been distinctive about the development of the refugee relations industry, when compared to earlier elements of the race relations industry, is that it has developed in a context of increasingly direct delegation of tasks by the state to voluntary organisations, enforced through mechanisms such as 'market tendering', 'best value frameworks' and 'contractual

compliance', and with a focus on bureaucratic efficiency rather than democratic accountability.⁷⁸ There was some evidence among participants in my research that this may have transferred some of the tensions away from the organisational level, where contracts operate, but intensified tensions at the level of individual volunteers, who, by the nature of their unpaid work, are resistant to reduction of their activity to a contractual basis.

State interventions to influence forms of action

[Our organisation] always said we cannot get any money from the government...As a collective voice, how can you really advertise the work and the kind of action we are doing, [if] the government [says] 'I give you my money, but with a string of conditions attached...you work for me...because this is the money...I know that ok, you want to defend people who I...oppress, but if I give you money, you have to be limited in the action. I can give you a room of action, but not hundred per cent'...[VOL takes government contracts], you can see some attitudes that reflect that, because they know, the money [they are] being paid from the government, and this is the guidelines...[they] have to do this, this, this. (refugee man, arrived in Britain in 2002)

The neo-liberal capitalist offensive since the 1980s, which was an attempt to stave off the capitalist crisis, destabilized national and international orders. Labour's initiatives to 'build social capital' between 1997 and 2010 represented a less obvious and directly repressive element in a wider strategy, also including increasing physical repression, to cope with the negative consequences of this destabilization for ruling elites.⁷⁹ Social capital interventions can be understood as a particular approach within longer traditions of cooption and oppression, with conscious strategies to influence refugees' forms of action operating alongside an expanding apparatus of border police, detention and removal centres, reporting regimes and deportation. Control of material resources that are needed to maintain current services and fill gaps have been used as a means of influence over the forms of action taken by refugees, alongside control of the mainstream media and research and educational institutions, which are used to promote ideas that suit the interests of the capitalist classes. By recruiting individual refugees to voluntary positions as they attempt to establish new networks, relationships and organisations, the state has gained influence over the shape of these individuals' actions, and through them the activity, understandings and forms of engagement of other refugees.

Complex social/market hybrids thus take shape: state institutions engage with voluntary organisations on a contractual basis; voluntary organisations engage individual refugees as volunteers by offering a range of material and non-material incentives and opportunities; and refugees, as volunteers, engage wider refugees as users, drawing on shared experiences of asylum and simultaneously bridging across differences in nationality, age, religion and gender, as they do their best to help others within the confines of the asylum system. At the level of the whole system, this represents the continued compliance of large numbers of refugees with the British

state, despite ongoing experiences of its oppressive character and, in many cases, deep mistrust. Maintaining this process necessitates offering direct or indirect benefits, not only to the individuals involved, but to the wider communities that volunteers wish to help. By making limited concessions in the form of funding to selected refugee organizations and charities, which do not threaten the interests of the ruling class, the state has been able to maintain the involvement of refugees in forms of engagement that, in the final analysis, are to their detriment, because they help to manage and sustain the oppressive structures of the UK asylum system. This means the continued deportation, incarceration and enforced destitution of thousands of people every year, thereby containing and disciplining the threat that they pose to imperialist divisions of labour.

⁶⁰ Griffiths, D., et al. (2005). *Refugee Community Organisations and Dispersal: Networks, resources and social capital*. Bristol: The Policy Press.

⁶¹ WLRI. (2005). *Women refugees - from volunteers to employees: a research project on paid and unpaid work in the voluntary sector and volunteering as a pathway into employment*. London: Working Lives Research Institute.

⁶² Wilson, R. and H. Lewis. (2006). *A Part of Society: Refugees and asylum seekers volunteering in the UK*. Leeds: Tandem Communications and Research.

⁶³ Hynes, P. (2009). 'Contemporary compulsory dispersal and the absence of space for the restoration of trust'. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 22(1), 97-121.

⁶⁴ Briskman, L. and S. Cemlyn (2005). 'Reclaiming humanity for asylum-seekers: A social work response'. *International Social Work*, 48(6), 714-724.

⁶⁵ Sales, R. (2002). 'The deserving and the undeserving? Refugees, asylum seekers and welfare in Britain'. *Critical Social Policy*, 22(3), 456-478.

⁶⁶ VMDC Viraj Mendis Defence Campaign (1986). *Viraj Mendis Must Stay*. London: Larkin Publications; Webber, F. (2012). *Borderline Justice: the fight for refugee and migrant rights*. London: Pluto.

⁶⁷ Welford, G. (1988). Father wins battle to stay with his family. *The Journal*, 17th November, 9.

⁶⁸ Gledhill, V. (2004). Family's joy at return to the UK. *Evening Chronicle*, 8 December,

⁶⁹ Ford, C. (1998). Deportation flight switch. *The Journal*, 30 June,

⁷⁰ Kennedy, S. (2000). Refugees want a humane deal. *Evening Chronicle*, 2 October,

⁷¹ Evening Chronicle. (2004). Family wins right to stay. *Evening Chronicle*, 23 June,

⁷² Eskovitch, J. (2006). 'Asylum seekers organise in Scotland'. *Fight Racism! Fight Imperialism!*(190 April / May).

⁷³ Però, D. and J. Solomos (2010). 'Introduction: migrant politics and mobilization: exclusion, engagements, incorporation'. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 33(1), 1-18.

⁷⁴ WLRI. (2005). *Women refugees - from volunteers to employees: a research project on paid and unpaid work in the voluntary sector and volunteering as a pathway into employment*. London: Working Lives Research Institute.

⁷⁵ Morison, J. (2000). 'The government-voluntary sector compacts: governance, governmentality, and civil society'. *Journal of Law and Society*, 27(1), 98-132.

⁷⁶ Evelyn Oldfield Unit. (2004). *Refugee Volunteering: Integration in Action. Report of a National Conference*. London.

⁷⁷ Griffiths, D., et al. (2005). *Refugee Community Organisations and Dispersal: Networks, resources and social capital*. Bristol: The Policy Press.

⁷⁸ Morison, J. (2000). 'The government-voluntary sector compacts: governance, governmentality, and civil society'. *Journal of Law and Society*, 27(1), 98-132.

⁷⁹ Coole, D. (2009). 'Repairing civil society and experimenting with power: a genealogy of social capital'. *Political Studies*, 57(6), 374-396.

6. Implications for action

The contradiction between the British state and refugees outlined above implies that strategies aiming to defend the rights of refugees need to take into account the need for active struggle, based on alliances that are independent of the state. For much of the voluntary sector this has not been the case, and many organisations have instead operated on the assumption that the state's treatment of refugees is based on some combination of incompetence/ignorance/indifference/media pressures, but not an active hostility rooted in powerful material interests. Consequently much of the activity that has been motivated by the wish to support refugees – and has played a vital role in helping many individuals to survive – has at the same time helped to perpetuate and manage their oppression. This situation has been intensified by the state's direct or indirect influence over funding, and by the insecurity of funding for many organisations.

Social workers and other practitioners who are not refugees can support the development of links between refugees and other oppressed groups, offer information on both the underlying interests and the technical workings of the British state, and engage with refugees in building collective anti-racist movements. Integral to this must be respect for the right of refugees to determine their own forms of struggle and to organise separately when they consider it necessary. It is important to reassert the political agency and conscious decision-making of refugees and other migrants. This is particularly urgent at a time when policy has shifted to 'victims of trafficking' as a new priority among migrants for state assistance, in a conception that includes requirements of extreme victimhood and 'helplessness' as a condition for state support,⁸⁰ as part of a wider objectification of migrants. Bandana Ahmad suggests that 'For social workers, it is often an easier option to focus on the symptoms of oppression than on causes of oppression', leading to an approach equating 'disadvantage' with clients and therefore working to 'help disadvantaged blacks', rather than working with clients to challenge the causes of their oppression.⁸¹ There is not necessarily a conflict between starting from the contradiction between the capitalist state and refugees and engaging in forms of action that respond to immediate survival needs in the context of destitution, or legal battles for status. Initiatives taken by the anti-austerity movement in Greece in the recent period, to provide free healthcare and facilitate direct exchanges between farmers and urban residents,⁸² or the survival programmes of the Black Panther Party,⁸³ provide good examples of how activities to meet immediate needs can be conducted as part of a conscious struggle against the state.

Professionals need to decide whether they are on the side of the state or of refugees, and to acknowledge the fundamental conflict at the heart of the state's relation to refugees as a collectively oppressed group, rooted in the character of the British state as fundamentally capitalist and imperialist. This implies that the effective development of trust and engagement with the state may be to the extreme detriment of refugees. Social workers and other practitioners can also play a role in building awareness and support for the struggles of refugees among other sections of the working class and wider society. This could lessen refugees' isolation and their

consequent dependence on the state, extend their influence and increase the collective resources available to them. In some cases constraints from funders, employers and others may place paid practitioners in a poor position to take the most effective action. This should not be used as an excuse for taking action which is detrimental to refugees' wellbeing, but may mean that sometimes the most effective action social workers and other professionals can take is to step aside and allow others to act.

Refugees' direct experience of the asylum system offers unique insights, which others need to learn from. Refugees who combine reflection on their personal and collective experience with an analysis of the root causes of refugees' oppression might play a vital leadership role, similar to Antonio Gramsci's concept of 'organic intellectuals'.⁸⁴ Bernard Davies identifies potential for volunteers to provide a politicising and critical voice within organisations and an organic link to users.⁸⁵ This potential could be seized on by refugees as volunteers, to use their position in the organisation to extend links with, and between, refugees as users, with the aim of increasing the accountability of the organisation to refugees outside, over and above the priorities of funders or the state. Some refugees could consider more carefully the basis on which they engage with the British state and the relative risks and advantages of different alliances, and, when engaging collectively, whether to accept money from the state, which may be tied to particular forms of activity.

Everyone concerned with the rights of refugees needs to press for an end to the criminalisation of asylum and migration by the state. As argued throughout this pamphlet and in more detail in my book, racialised oppression and exploitation are not the product of arbitrary policy choices, but are fundamental to the imperialist capitalist system. Effective action for change in Britain's asylum and immigration policy therefore needs to be combined with action to transform the wider economic, social and political relations, within Britain and between Britain and other countries.

⁸⁰ Anderson, B. (2010). 'Mobilizing migrants, making citizens: migrant domestic workers as political agents'. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 33(1), 60-74.

⁸¹ Ahmad, B. (1993). *Black Perspectives in Social Work*. Birmingham: Venture Press.

⁸² Saliba, A. (2013). Greece: what the potato movement did next. *New Internationalist*. Available at: <http://newint.org/features/2013/01/01/greece-potato-movement/> [accessed: 14 April 2013].

⁸³ Hilliard, D., Ed. (2008). *The Black Panther Party: Service to the People Programs*. Albuquerque, NM, University of New Mexico Press.

⁸⁴ Gramsci, A. ([1929-1935] 1982). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

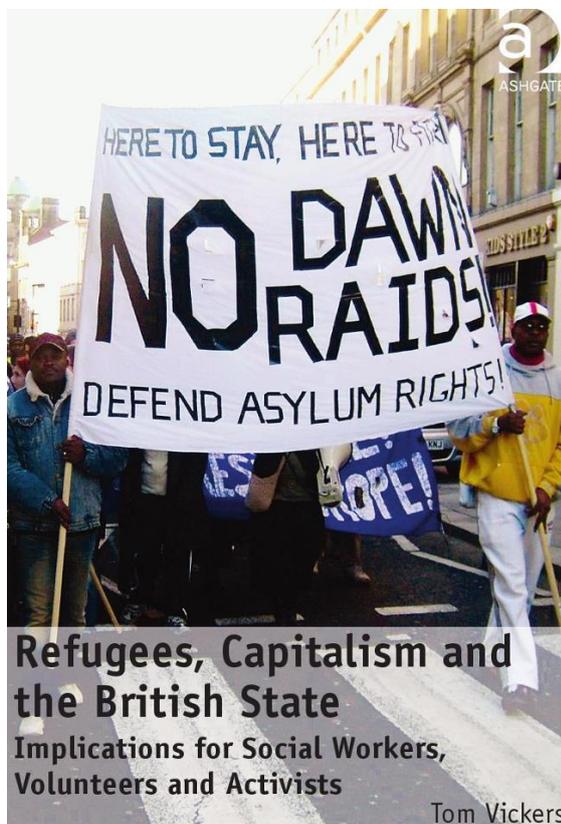
⁸⁵ Davies, B. (1996). *Volunteering versus Professionalism*. Leicester.



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