

Anti-Braverman: supporting asylum seekers and refugees

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In my community ESOL classes are adults from Iraq, Iran, Eritrea, Sudan, Afghanistan, Kurdistan as well as spouses from India and Pakistan. A mix of men and women. Various job and education histories (drivers, farmers, teachers, housewives, an Iranian wholesale-newspaper distributor, a hairdresser, a medical student from Kabul, excluded from university because of her sex).

ESOL, a former colleague once said, is a barometer of conflict and state repression, and of immigration patterns and policy. Some of the students are from long-settled communities; a few were resettled under UN-programmes; others, accommodated in temporary shared housing or local hotels, have no right-to-work or expectation that their asylum claim will soon be determined, and are anxious and frustrated.

Like other asylum seekers and refugees (ASRs) in the UK today, these students are the target of a cynical policy assault led by Home Secretary Suella Braverman and Sunak's placeman in the Home Office, Robert Jenrick, who merely parrots the rhetoric: 'small boats', 'evil smugglers', 'criminal gangs'. In an attempt partly to hold the 'Red Wall' of historically Labour seats, the Government has introduced the *Nationality and Borders Bill*, which criminalises asylum, and in the process short-sightedly contravenes the system of international agreements that underpin inter-state relations and the global economy.

The Government's asylum policy is not straightforwardly anti-immigration, however. UK capital still relies on migrants for readily-trained workers which eases the need for long-term investment in vocational skills, and to fill the dirty, dangerous, demeaning jobs in, say, agriculture, construction, and care.

In this context, ASRs are a useful foil. Asylum deterrence demonstrates a tough immigration policy. This is not new. New Labour's managed migration, like Sunak's immigration policy today, also distinguished between 'bogus' asylum seekers (rule-breakers, queue-jumpers) and 'genuine' refugees and economically-additive migrants who 'follow the rules'. In 2003, New Labour proposed exporting asylum seekers to third countries and housing them in ex-military bases. Their approach was partly designed to soothe the public worries (real or imagined) during a time of political popularity. Sunak's government is desperate to prevent its political collapse in a time of multiple crises when the neoliberal and neoconservative elements of the post-Thatcher consensus are coming unravelled. How do we respond to this as educators?

Rightly, the recent UCU congress expressed support for asylum and refuge. It condemned the racism of anti-refugee policy and called for mobilisations and counter-demonstrations against the far right, strike-day teach-ins on refugees rights, and fee-remitted access to education for ASRs.

First, we should be wary of the tendency for occasional mobilisations in areas where the activist left has few roots (in north Notts, for instance) at which visitors tell 'fascist scum' to 'get off our streets' from behind the protecting barrier of police lines, and that 'refugees are welcome here', when the evidence suggests probably not; and equally wary of that kind of liberal cosmopolitanism that takes little account of the material causes of not-exactly-voluntary migration, economic or political, but posits a cosy borderless mobility rooted in what Colhoun called 'the class consciousness of frequent travellers'.

Second, most ASR students are in FE and community provision. The demand for access to HE is rightly made, yet more pressing are the waiting lists for ESOL courses: the lack of fast-track and, in England, level 3 programmes (it can take five years to get to ESOL Level 2) and specific provision for academic preparation or vocational requalification; and the non-recognition of ESOL qualifications even in colleges where ESOL is provided.

Third, we should support existing initiatives combining language education and a politics of integration-from-below in which ASRs are active participants (citizens-in-practice) not merely recipients of solidarity and support. Examples include Thanet's *Beyond-The-Page* and *English for Action*, a London-based initiative that links ESOL with community activism (1).

Fourth, we need a programme of education in colleges in addition to HE teach-ins, not only focusing on asylum myths and misinformation but also addressing the worries among working-class students about the lack of promise in their own futures. Working with other trade unions, refugee and migration-rights campaigns and anti-poverty initiatives, UCU could be the prompt for collaborative campaigning educational programmes, much as it took the initiative for the Save ESOL Campaign of 2008.

1. Beyond the Page <https://beyondthepage.org.uk/>, English for Action <https://efalondon.org/>