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Refugee Week: frequently asked questions answered about refugees

For Refugee Week, refugee advocate Clare Moseley sets out why trade unionists should care about refugees and answers some frequently asked questions about them

Why should trade unionists care about refugees?

We know the government uses anti-refugee narratives to confuse us. Telling people that refugees are invading our shores, threatening the NHS, affecting house prices, and stealing jobs creates fear and division. This hides real issues such as increasing wealth inequality, tax cuts for the rich, underfunding of public services and a failing economy. We need to counter the rhetoric so we can address our real concerns.

The basis of the trade union movement is the solidarity of ordinary people; those who on their own cannot fight for their rights but who together can achieve justice for all. Asylum seekers have no documents. They cannot stand up for their rights and are some of the most vulnerable people in society. Fighting for equality, justice and fairness is in line with trade union values.

Are refugees arriving in the UK “Illegal Immigrants”?

When a refugee arrives in the UK, they come to claim asylum. Claiming asylum is a basic human right under Article 14(1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, supported by the Refugee Convention, both of which the UK signed up to in the aftermath of two world wars. Under international law, a country has a duty to assess the asylum claim of a person who arrives and makes one, and to ensure they have access to fair and efficient procedures. If it doesn't, arguably it is the country that is breaking the law, not the asylum seeker.

Are people coming from Calais 'genuine' refugees?

[Evidence on parliaments' website in 2021 showed](#) that 76-86% of those who crossed the Channel on small boats were subsequently granted refugee status, meaning that they were most definitely genuine refugees. [Another analysis by UNHCR concluded that the 'clear majority' of people arriving in the UK by small boats](#) across the Channel should be considered to be refugees. Analysis by the Refugee Council shows that of all those who crossed the Channel in 2022, two thirds should be [granted asylum when their claims are \(eventually\) processed](#).

Why do refugees cross safe countries?

[The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees \(UNHCR\) is clear](#): “there is no requirement under international law for asylum-seekers to seek protection in the first safe country they reach”.

But let's put this another way – why shouldn't they? If every refugee stopped in the first safe country, all Europe's refugees would be massed in Greece or Italy and that makes no sense.

The fact is that most refugees do stop in other countries. 93% of refugees in Europe don't head for the UK. However, some have specific ties to our country such as family, friends or language. Why shouldn't we help these people? We know that British people are just as compassionate as other people in other countries in Europe. We didn't suggest that Ukrainian refugees should stay in Poland.

Can we really afford for people to come to the UK?

The simple answer is, yes. Once their asylum claims are approved people can work and support themselves, they can pay tax and use their skills and talents to **benefit** our society, there is no reason for them to cost us anything. Instead of paying millions of pounds a day for hotels, an up-front investment in Home Office case workers would mean the massive claims backlog could be cleared and thousands of people could move on with their lives.

How many people should we accept?

Last year we issued 230,000 visas to Ukrainians and 150,000 to people from Hong Kong. There is no reason we can't do the same for just 60,000 from everywhere else in the world, particularly when we have 1.3 million job vacancies that we are unable to fill, and it is the companionate thing to do.

Why are more of the people in small boats men?

The journeys to Calais are incredibly harsh. From Africa they might cross the Sahara which takes many lives, then Libya, which is lawless. The United Nations has said people are subjected to “unimaginable horrors” from the moment they enter Libya. From the Middle East the journey is across the Balkans where night-time temperatures can be minus 20 and the borders are rife with beatings and human rights abuses. Few women and children would survive these horrors.

Many families will not risk their daughter’s safety on a journey to Europe. People trafficking, sexual abuse, exploitation and violence is far more prevalent for a woman or girls travelling as a refugee, so the men of the family take on the duty, claiming asylum if they survive to bring their family over safely.

So the young men you see on these boats are doing their best to protect their families. Their mothers, grandmothers, sisters, babies, daughters. How often does a father say they’d die for their daughter, a husband say they’d die for their wife? Well these guys are putting it into practice. Let’s hope and pray that our sons, husbands, partners, nephews and brothers never have to have their love tested like this.

Why don’t they come the ‘legal’ way?

Everyone would prefer to travel here safely, in ferries, planes or on trains. But unless you are covered by a specific scheme, there are no legal routes to the UK. For most refugees in order to claim asylum in the UK you have to be physically present in the UK, but there is no way to get here. That means that to claim asylum, people have to risk their lives in lorries or small boats.

Does the UK pay more benefits to asylum seekers?

[In the UK, the weekly allowance for an adult asylum-seeker is £45](#), if they are not in a hotel where their food is provided – in which case it falls to just £9.10 a week. That is comparable with France where [people get £41.88 each week](#) but [considerably lower than in Germany where they get £129.32](#). The difference is that other European countries allow asylum-seekers to work if their claims haven’t been decided within a certain number of months. In France they can work after six months, and in Germany after 9 months. In the UK, they can only work after 12 months. That is a whole year of living off £6 a day while being unable to contribute their skills to our economy and country.

Does the UK have space to help refugees?

Astonishingly, 50% of the UK's rural land is [owned by less than 1% of our population](#).—This is because of wealth disparity – the gap between the rich and the poor. The UK has a high level of income inequality [compared to other developed countries](#)—with more than a third of our land still in the hands of aristocrats and traditional 'landed gentry'. This inequality is what makes our country feel full – not immigration or refugees.

If we gave people visas to travel safely, would more people come?

Right now, pretty much anyone who wants to, is **coming anyway**. They are crossing on small boats, and nothing the government has tried to control or deter this has had any effect. Safe passage visas will not see more people crossing the Channel, it will simply mean that those **already doing** so will be under a managed and controlled process, and those without viable claims will be discouraged.

Further, creating visas for Ukrainians did not drive a majority of Ukrainians to come to the UK. In fact, less than 3% of Ukrainian refugees came to the UK with a great many more heading for Poland, Germany and Czechia.

In 2022, 93% of refugees in Europe did not head to the UK to claim asylum. For all the same reasons that refugees come to the UK – family ties, community ties, belief that for example, Germany will help - the vast majority of refugees who come to Europe claim asylum elsewhere and will continue to do so.