

Annual Report 2017-2018

South Yorkshire Migration and Asylum Action Group (SYMAAG)

The good news: in our 11 year history this has probably been our most active and successful year with a huge range of campaigns and educational activities, organised by a broader group of SYMAAG activists including refugees and people in the asylum process

The bad news: we've been doing this because racism and hostility to asylum seekers, refugees and all migrants has been on the rise, sanctioned by state institutions, legitimised by the Brexit process, promoted by the mainstream media. summed up by Government policy aimed at creating a Hostile Environment for undocumented migrants.

We hold annual strategy meetings with our friends and partners in other asylum and migrants' rights groups. The last was in October 2017 in Sheffield. Here's what we decided our campaigning priorities would be:

- To continue to resist the **Hostile Environment** policy and its operation through the creation of "internal borders" enforced by citizens and institutions in the NHS, banks, housing, schools and local authorities
- To campaign against **immigration detention**, aiming to close detention centres while campaigning for a limit to detention times and respect for detainees
- To stop G4S running the new **asylum housing** contract while campaigning for improvements to asylum housing conditions and tenants' rights. To oppose G4S/ Serco etc involvement in other asylum-related institutions and services
- To demand better **mental health services for refugees**, particularly in the provision of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) support in the NHS
- To continue to raise awareness of the relationship between **migration and global politics and** colonial history
- To campaign for **asylum seekers' right to work**
- To promote the **rights and welfare of children** in the asylum system
- To campaign against **No Resort to Public Funds (NRPF)** rules, particularly as they affect lone refugee mothers and children's housing provision

We realised these were ambitious targets, particularly as we are a volunteer organisation with no grant funding. On the plus side we have a wealth of experience and many friends and allies locally and nationally. How did we do?

- We did not foresee the **Hostile Environment** policy coming under so much publicity and criticism nationally. It was journalistic exposure of the barring of access to NHS cancer treatment to a 'Windrush' generation citizen which sparked a political process leading to the Home Secretary's resignation. We have used social media and sympathetic journalists to help make experiences of the hostile environment personal and human ones. We have worked with asylum-rights groups, trade unionists, academics and local authorities to explore ways of not complying with the implementation of 'internal borders' and sharing sensitive data about people's immigration status. Legal action and campaigning has led to some policy changes in data collection by schools, the NHS and access to banking. Five South Yorkshire candidates in the 2017 General Election to committed themselves

to opposition to the hostile environment via our Election Pledges and hustings meeting and two of these, Paul Blomfield and Louise Haigh, were elected as MPs

- We have focussed our campaign against **immigration detention** on the closest centre to us, Morton Hall in Lincolnshire, where four people have died in a year. We have organised three protests there in the last year alongside former detainees and campaigners from Nottingham, Leeds and Manchester. These protests and detainees' resistance have spotlighted abuse at Morton Hall in parliamentary investigations and the media, the Daily Mirror for example. Joint protests at Morton Hall have created new alliances between SYMAAG and groups like Student Action for Refugees and Black Lives Matter. We regard Morton Hall authorities' attempt to restrict protests inside and outside the centre as evidence of our impact. We have also organised transport to protests at Yarls Wood detention centre and supported the women's hunger strike there. Our chair, John Grayson, investigated Ireland's Direct Provision system (a combination of detention and asylum housing) and we held a meeting and film-showing to publicise his (grim) findings as well as stories of resistance there.
- After the latest damning parliamentary enquiry into privatised **asylum housing**, we were dismayed, though not surprised, to see G4S allowed to bid for the new £4 billion 10 year asylum housing contract. Through the work of John Grayson, Violet Dickenson and our members who are G4S asylum tenants we have led, supported and informed other campaigns nationally. We have briefed journalists, film-makers and MPs, contributed to parliamentary investigations, had a high social media profile, worked with housing justice activist academics and conducted dozens of media interviews on the issue. We appeared on a BBC2 Victoria Derbyshire show's investigation into G4S asylum housing in Derby and the north east. We eventually pushed Sheffield Council into stopping G4S forcing tenants to share bedrooms in summer 2017. We organised a well-attended national Human Rights and Asylum Housing conference in Sheffield in February which created a network of local campaigns. We have given practical support to other asylum housing campaigns, particularly in the north east, Midlands and Northern Ireland. We recognise John Grayson's tireless work on this issue which has made SYMAAG the go-to organisation on this issue nationally and brought some real and practical improvements for asylum tenants. We have continued to highlight the involvement of G4S and other corporations in immigration detention, immigration enforcement/deportation, policing and children's prisons and worked with the Palestine Solidarity Campaign against G4S' role in repression of Palestinians. We are pleased that some of these issues are now being taken seriously by the Labour Party, human rights organisations and others
- SYMAAG member, and Hope and Dignity Hearth advocate, Gogo Loughrey has led our work on better **mental health services for refugees** and trafficked women through work with Healthwatch Sheffield. Outside specialist services, there is a lack of understanding of the specific needs and cultures of refugees and asylum seekers requiring mental health support, especially in relation to PTSD. We are organising two workshops on PTSD and refugees as part of Refugee Week and have worked with the Sheffield Mental Health Action Group and local church-based soup kitchens on the issue. We have also highlighted the issue of mental health problems in detention centres, particularly Morton Hall where severe depression and suicide risk affects almost half of the people detained there

- It has always been important to us to understand the relationship between **migration and global politics**. This year we have organised meetings on the lack of human rights in Turkey and Kurdistan; on why refugees are forced to escape Iran and on Eritrean history and politics. These have sometimes been understandably heated and challenging events, though always well-attended. Led by SYMAAG member (and photographer) Manuchehr Maleki, we have worked alongside Sheffield University Politics Society and Sheffield Amnesty International to bring together émigré communities, students, human rights activists and leading academics, activists, politicians and journalists from these countries. These events importantly highlight the skills and knowledge of refugees who have been political activists in their countries of origin. We aim to hold similar events on Afghanistan, Yemen and Cameroon this year
- We have not organised a campaign for **asylum seekers' right to work**. We need to look at how to do this alongside potential partners in the Labour Party and Barnsley and Sheffield Trades Union Councils. We have pointed out the fact that people detained in immigration detention centres *are* allowed to work but paid as little as £1 per day
- The theme of the **rights and welfare of children** in the asylum system has been integral to our work on asylum housing, Initial Accommodation, immigration detention and destitution. John Grayson and Violet Dickenson have been determined to expose the dangers of G4S and Jomast-run mother and baby hostels including overcrowding, squalid conditions and fire hazards and we have worked with sympathetic journalists to publicise this issue
- Many refugees and migrant families from the EU have **No Resort to Public Funds**. We have worked with organisations locally and nationally like Project 17, Law Centres, Why Refugee Women? and our friends in Development and Advancement and Women's Empowerment (DEWA) to campaign against this policy and the often inadequate responses of local authorities to the homelessness and destitution it often creates. In Sheffield, the first City of Sanctuary, Violet and John have led an ongoing campaign to prevent mothers and children being placed in overcrowded and dangerous bed and breakfast hostels for long periods by Sheffield City Council

These were the issues we prioritised but of course many others came up during the year. Here are some of them:

General Election June 2017: we contacted every candidate in South Yorkshire to ask them to endorse an Asylum Election Pledge based on our campaigning priorities and the issue of safe passage for refugees across Europe. We held a well-attended election hustings meeting in Sheffield where candidates representing Labour, Greens, Liberal Democrats and UKIP attended and tried to answer audience questions

Racism, hate-crimes and Brexit: SYMAAG was represented by Phillis Andrew at a Rotherham event organised by The Monitoring Group North to explain how these issues affect asylum seekers and refugees in particular. We were pleased to make links with other anti-racist campaigns in South Yorkshire

Preparation with initial asylum interviews: we worked with Right to Remain, the Protection Gap campaign, DEWA, Why Refugee Women? and Early Asylum Support to

offer advice and support to asylum seekers at the crucial initial interview stage. Violet Dickenson has organised six information sessions with women at the G4S-run Wakefield Urban House Initial Accommodation centre as part of an ongoing project

One Day Without Us: we worked alongside groups in Sheffield representing EU migrants and refugees and the local Roma community to organise a successful one day festival in February with a march, rally and exhibitions to recognise the role migrants play in our society and the pressures they experience, particularly in the context of Brexit

Deportation Charter flights and the criminalisation of protest: we were asked to support the campaign of the Stanstead 15, activists who were charged with terrorism-related offences for protesting against a deportation charter flight! Phillis Andrew represented SYMAAG at a demonstration outside their court hearing and conducted media interviews on behalf of this ongoing campaign

The Sanctuary Centre

We're pleased that Sheffield now has a centre providing advice, support and a safe space for asylum seekers and refugees. SYMAAG members have provided practical support to establish and maintain the centre and we are happy it has received new funding to ensure its future. The centre is our main meeting place and we look forward to having office space there

SYMAAG

As you can see it's been a busy year for us. Some of our work has been alongside Sheffield's galaxy of asylum rights groups including established ones like DEWA, Why Refugee Women? ASSIST, South Yorkshire Refugee Law and Justice, STAR, City of Sanctuary and the Committee to Defend Asylum Seekers and newer groups like Early Asylum Support and Lesbian Asylum Support.

More than ever we have a national profile, especially in our campaigns on asylum housing and immigration detention where organisations including Right to Remain, the Institute for Race Relations and Shine a Light promote and amplify our work. This gives us a wider audience on social media as well as print and broadcasting media. Our work on asylum housing and the privatisation of the immigration industry – the “asylum market” - has also provided us with opportunities to work with groups in other parts of Europe and beyond.

The expansion of our work has led to the necessity, as well as the aim, of more SYMAAG members taking a leading role in our established campaigns and in initiating new ones. Violet, Phillis, Gogo, Marian and Manuchehr, amongst others, have boosted our capacity and it is a welcome development for an asylum-rights group to be led by a true partnership between asylum seekers, refugees and locally born activists who have never experienced forced migration. We hope to reflect this in the make up of our new Executive Committee and in the roles of Chair and Secretary this year.

After 5 years as SYMAAG Chair and our main spokesperson, John Grayson is stepping down. I would like to thank him on behalf of SYMAAG for his determined and unrelenting work and know that he will continue to play a big role in our group. His vast and growing body of published work, particularly on asylum housing and the hostile environment, indicates the impact his work continues to have.

Thanks are due to Robert Siamtinta SYMAAG Treasurer and assistant Treasurer Zhila who have quietly but efficiently made sure our bills are paid and that when our members need financial support to attend events they get it.

As Secretary, the role has expanded along with our level of activity. I have been responsible for publicising our work via our website, social media and SYMAAG News bulletins. Finally I want to thank Manuchehr, Bary, Phillis and Gwyneth for their help with my role as SYMAAG Secretary on social media, publicity and the day-to-day administrative tasks necessary to keep us going. One day I hope that someone from another country will take my job.

Stuart Crosthwaite
SYMAAG Secretary