

South Yorkshire Migration and Asylum Action Group (SYMAAG)

Annual Report 2018-19

UK Government hostility to people who migrate here didn't start with Theresa May and it won't end with her departure. But as Home Secretary, she introduced the Hostile Environment policy. As Prime Minister she was responsible for extending and consolidating that policy and the hurt and violence it causes. This year, alongside refugees, asylum seekers and people who support them, we've been picking up some of the pieces that result from this policy.

This report will summarise what we have achieved. And what remains to be done as we experience an upsurge in racism and a growth in support for the far right, sanctioned by (and reflected in) the policy of deliberately creating a Hostile Environment for migrants.

SYMAAG is an entirely voluntary organisation with small resources but we have achieved much to be proud of since our last Annual General Meeting in June 2018. It has been our busiest and most successful year since we began campaigning for all migrants' rights in 2007.

We hold annual strategy meetings with our friends and partners in other asylum and migrants' rights groups. The last was in October 2018 in Sheffield.

Here's what we decided our main campaigning priorities would be for 2018/19.

Stop G4S getting new Asylum Housing contracts

Against Immigration Detention

For Migrant Workers' rights in the context of Brexit

For Healthcare - including mental health - provision for asylum seekers

Against Deportations and Immigration Enforcement policies

Other campaign objectives: for asylum seekers' right to work and increase in asylum support; highlight dangers of Mediterranean Sea crossings; amnesty for long-term asylum seekers; excessive fees for extending right to remain; raise issue of families on No Recourse to Public Funds and Limited Leave to Remain status; lobby for agencies including Sheffield Council to produce 'myth-busting' material about asylum seekers; increase National Asylum Support Service housing 'move-on' period; raise awareness about latest Immigration Act; ; inform and influence Labour Party policy on refugee rights

So did we achieve our objectives this year?

In short, yes. Except for migrant workers' rights in the context of Brexit.

Stop G4S getting new Asylum Housing contracts

Our 7 year campaign against asylum housing being run by security company G4S has been successful. There

was joy amongst asylum tenants when the news was announced in January 2019. From September 2019 G4S will lose all their asylum housing contracts, including here in Yorkshire, Humberside and the north east. We didn't do this on our own. This national campaign was led by asylum tenants with our support. We were successful in building a coalition of asylum rights groups (particularly in Yorkshire, the north-east and Midlands), anti-G4S activists internationally, tenants-rights groups and refugee charities (after some initial disinterest) and with some political backing from Labour and Green parties.

We made this issue a nationally recognised one using every campaign avenue from parliamentary inquiries to street protests, film-making to public debate with G4S management. We have mobilised support and helped to create regional and national networks of asylum tenants and supporters which increase tenants' confidence and knowledge of their rights, whichever institution provides asylum housing. Recognition should go particularly to John Grayson for his work supporting individual asylum tenants and tirelessly researching, advocating and organising on this issue since 2012. And to Violet Dickenson who has supported and informed asylum tenants - and people in the G4S-run Urban House Initial Accommodation centre in Wakefield.

However the new 10 year asylum housing contracts remain in the hands of private companies and corporations. In our region the Mears Group will take over in September 2019. We have already met their senior management and discussed the standard of asylum housing we expect from them. Initial indications are that they will treat asylum tenants with some dignity - pledging to end forced room-sharing, not using subcontractors, properly training staff, ending large 'mother and baby hostels' and holding regular inspections to maintain quality housing. Further meetings with Mears are scheduled and we, alongside asylum tenants, will work to ensure these commitments are fulfilled.

SYMAAG was also active and successful on the related issue of hostel housing for destitute refugee families with no recourse to public funds in Sheffield. John and Violet in particular highlighted the dangerous conditions for refugee children in the use of bed and breakfast accommodation used by Sheffield City Council. After protests, speeches to Council meetings and meetings with Councillors we were eventually successful in persuading Sheffield City Council not to use this type of accommodation for refugee families. We remain alert and expect Sheffield City Council to honour this commitment in Sheffield, the first City of Sanctuary

Against Immigration Detention

We have jointly organised - along with Sheffield University Student Action for Refugees (STAR) - two more demonstrations at Morton Hall, the closest detention centre to us, where 4 people died within one year. These were small but welcomed by the detainees. We are working with activists in Lincoln (10 miles from Morton Hall) and plan a march from Lincoln to Morton Hall later this year.

Alongside These Walls Must Fall and Right to Remain we have organised training sessions in Sheffield on practical help to prepare people seeking asylum for the possibility of being detained and to co-ordinate campaigns to end immigration detention. We have supported campaigns and parliamentary inquiries aimed at limiting immigration detention to 28 days while campaigning for the closure of all immigration detention centres.

We were pleased to support Mount Pleasant Park Football Club's well-supported 5-a-side football match outside Sheffield Home Office in May to protest against immigration detention, after their team coach was detained at Morton Hall.

We addressed Sheffield Trade Union Council, gained their support for the These Walls Must Fall campaign and committed them to writing to Sheffield City Council and all Sheffield MPs on the issue. We are working with others to commit Sheffield City Council to opposing immigration detention via a motion at their July full meeting.

For Migrant Workers' rights in the context of Brexit

SYMAAG helped organise a big Sheffield 'Migrants Welcome' demonstration in November 2018 to defend freedom of movement within Europe and beyond. We recognise that - as for people seeking asylum - restricting the rights of migrants from Europe to access public services is an issue for everyone as it undermines universal public provision. However, as in previous years, we have lacked the capacity to lead on the issue of the rights of migrant workers.

For Healthcare - including mental health - provision for asylum seekers

Our members have continued to highlight the restrictions to people seeking asylum accessing the healthcare they need and the consequences which they know from direct experience. We have worked with Patients Not Passports, Keep Our NHS Public and Maternity Action nationally to campaign for resistance to these restrictions through non-compliance and political change.

Locally we have been represented at the Sheffield Refugee and Asylum Health Group by Robert Spooner and Gogo Manyoni and have worked with Healthwatch to help them appreciate the nature of the restrictions for people seeking asylum. We have helped inform discussions at University of Sheffield and at Sheffield Festival of Debate on this issue, including its effects for children in asylum seeking families.

Our member Gogo Manyoni and the Hope and Dignity Hearth group have worked particularly on the importance of mental health provision and Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome counselling for people in the asylum process. She organised a meeting at Sheffield's Migration Matters festival and an exhibition at Sheffield Library.

Against Deportations and Immigration Enforcement policies

We first warned about the threat of deportations to Zimbabwe in July 2018, contacting MPs and demonstrating in Sheffield. In December our Zimbabwean members and others were interrogated by an official from the Zimbabwean Embassy, invited by the Home Office to Vulcan House. We responded with a demonstration outside Sheffield Home Office and getting the issue into national newspapers. But In January a number of Zimbabwean people from South Yorkshire were detained when they reported at Vulcan House and sent to Morton Hall detention centre with the threat of deportation to Zimbabwe. Widespread public protest, including a 77,000-strong petition for well-known Victor Mujakachi, national media coverage and effective legal support secured their release. SYMAAG helped mobilise 200 people - probably the biggest anti-deportation protest in Sheffield - when our member Marian Machekanyanga feared detention at Vulcan House when she went to report there. Marian showed enormous courage in speaking out on national TV and newspapers about the danger she and others would be in if they were deported to Zimbabwe where political violence remains at a frighteningly high level.

We have worked with Zimbabweans seeking asylum and their local associations around the UK and with the Restoration of Human Rights in Zimbabwe group to encourage a nationally organised campaign. We have been supported by local MPs Paul Blomfield and Gill Furniss and by Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott. However, the threat of deportation and the huge anxiety that brings remains. Marian has addressed Labour Party and trade union meetings with appeals for solidarity for herself, a fellow trade unionist from Zimbabwe, and for the rights of all Zimbabwean hoping to stay in the UK for safety.

Globally, the last year has seen the increased criminalisation of those who show solidarity with migrants including anti-deportation activists like the Stansted 15. SYMAAG worked with local and national campaigns to support Stansted 15 during their court proceedings. Our member Phillis Andrew was an effective national spokesperson for the campaign and in Sheffield we helped to organise 2 public protests to support the Stansted 15. The original terrorism-related (!) charges against the 15 were dropped although they were found guilty of lesser offences.

SYMAAG has supported many other anti-deportation campaigns, currently for Hamid Baygi from Sheffield where our member Manuchehr Dizaji has been central to acting for Hamid, a resident of the UK for 50 years.

Immigration enforcement has become part of everyday life in public institutions like health, schools, universities and in housing and banking. We successfully lobbied Sheffield City Council to refuse to govt funding for embedded immigration enforcement in council services although Barnsley and Rotherham councils have accepted. Regionally we have worked with Yorkshire Resists. Nationally we have continued to work with Unis Not Borders, Docs Not Cops and others to keep this aspect of the Hostile Environment policy in the news

Other campaign objectives (see above for itemised list)

We have had varying success on the other campaign objectives we set ourselves in October 2018.

We have worked as part of the national Lift The Ban campaign for **asylum seekers' right to work** and addressed Sheffield and Barnsley Trade Union Councils on the issue.

We have worked locally to support **refugee families with no recourse to public funds**, particularly those in bed and breakfast accommodation (see above). Nationally we have continued to work with Project 17 and others to highlight the situation of destitute migrant children and the responsibilities of local authorities to provide support

We have highlighted the danger of destitution for refugees who gain leave to remain but have only **28 days notice to 'move on'** from asylum accommodation and NASS asylum support into 'mainstream' housing and benefits. We have worked with local campaigners opposed to Universal Credit (UC) and with Sheffield City Council to point out that delays to UC payments will necessarily result in destitution for many refugees after gaining their status. We remain concerned that some refugees, though they have leave to remain, are not allowed to access to the benefits they need.

Our members in the **Labour and Green parties** have successfully mobilised local members for asylum rights protests on Zimbabwe, Stansted 15 and detention and invited asylum seekers to speak at their party events. We are pleased that Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott spoke out against deportations to Zimbabwe, opposed the privatisation of asylum housing and pledged that a Labour government would limit detention

to 28 days and close two detention centres. We hope this is the beginning of a more just and radical approach to refugee rights from both parties.

Where we have not had the capacity to organise campaigns on the other campaign objectives we have publicised these issues via our social media channels and website.

Education, Global Politics and Refugee Rights

SYMAAG has always tried to educate ourselves and others in understanding refugee issues in the context of global politics and colonial legacies. SYMAAG held a well attended and lively debate at the University of Sheffield organised by Manuchehr on Palestinian refugee rights. We helped Sheffield's Sudanese community organise 2 lively demonstrations in Sheffield in support of the ongoing people's uprising in Sudan. Manuchehr spoke about human rights in Iran at a Migration Matters film showing event. Our member Muhammad Bary introduced a discussion on the political situation in Bangladesh, UK/Bangladesh government relations and the dangers of deportation for refugees.

SYMAAG's links to refugees in Calais and Dunkirk were maintained by a support trip including Manuchehr in April. Through John and Manuchehr we have maintained our links with other European anti-racist and anti-fascist groups and hope to jointly host a local event with some of their representatives this year.

SYMAAG has helped raise awareness of the use of immigration detention internationally. Our member Phillis Andrew was invited to speak on a panel at a film showing of 'Island of Hungry Ghosts' at Sheffield Showroom in January 2019. He drew parallels between immigration detention in Australia (on Christmas Island) and in the UK.

Our member David Price completed his book on the history of migration to Sheffield and SYMAAG was involved in publicising the book and the issues it raises. We invited Corporate Watch to SYMAAG to discuss their new book on the UK border regime.

Media and Publicity

We have expanded our range of sympathetic TV, newspaper and radio media contacts locally and nationally enabling us to gain national coverage for urgent campaigns (eg the threat of deportations to Zimbabwe) as well as longstanding campaign issues like asylum housing and immigration detention. We have become a 'go-to' organisation about campaigns and comment on refugee rights issues for many journalists, our members being interviewed and quoted dozens of times in the last year.

We have written for Open Democracy, Institute for Race Relations and Right to Remain amongst others and SYMAAG photographer Manuchehr has had his work published and displayed.

Our social media presence has expanded with Manuchehr and myself as administrators of our Facebook page and Twitter account. We now also have a SYMAAG YouTube channel. Our website operates largely as an archive of our work and needs a redesign and dedicated administrator. SYMAAG News email bulletins inform our supporters about urgent news and events.

We need more written publicity for SYMAAG - an introductory leaflet, card and posters. We also need a new banner, our Dignity Not Detention banner is now 11 years old!

SYMAAG's Development

We have been able to expand our capacity this year because of the leading role taken by our refugee and asylum seeker members. Despite the adversity and stress of the UK immigration system - or perhaps because of it - Marian, Manuchehr, Phillis, Gogo, Bary and Violet in particular have been central to our public work. They have shown bravery and determination and inspired us all.

We have continued to work closely with South Yorkshire's many other asylum and refugee rights groups, individually, at The Sanctuary and via Sheffield Refugee Forum meetings. Our close contact with advice and legal support groups informs our campaign work leaving us free to make 'political' statements that charities are not able to express. Many new and younger people have become involved with our work through Sheffield Student Action for Refugees, the Stansted 15 campaign, Sheffield Foodhall and the Migration Matters Festival. We welcome them and look forward to them helping to shape SYMAAG's future work.

Because of the expansion of our work and our desire to build the confidence and capacity of our members we have shared the roles of Chair, Treasurer and Secretary. Thanks to Treasurer Robert Siamtinta and Assistant Treasurer Zhila for quietly but efficiently administering our finances, paying our bills and making sure no-one is excluded from events due to lack of money. A separate financial report will give more details of our current financial situation. Thanks to our co-Chairs who have kept us in order to get the job done. And thanks to my co-Secretary Manuchehr who has shared the work of administration, internal organisation and publicity.

Anthropologist Margaret Mead said "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world".

We hope you will actively support and help organise SYMAAG's work in the next year. A bigger group of committed people can change the world better and faster. I think that's what we need.

Stuart Crosthwaite

Co-Secretary, South Yorkshire Migration and Asylum Action Group (SYMAAG)