

South Yorkshire Migration and Asylum Action Group

Annual Report 2019–2020

Last year we predicted that the hostile environment policy would not end with the resignation of one of its key architects Theresa May. We're not pleased to have been proven right. This Conservative Government has openly reneged on its international commitments under the Refugee Convention and has fanned racism and hostility to migrants. But we also knew that resistance from migrants and their supporters would necessarily continue. This report summarises the South Yorkshire Migration and Asylum Action Group's role in supporting and amplifying that resistance.

SYMAAG is a group of volunteers based in South Yorkshire. We accept only 'no-strings' funding which allows us to speak out about the intensely political nature of immigration policy, the hostile environment and its impact on human beings. We are led by people with direct experience of the UK immigration system and multilingual skills. Despite the difficulties and stress deliberately created by the asylum system they have helped sustain and expand our work. This report is dedicated to them.

Organising during the pandemic

This report covers our work from July 2019–December 2020. The pandemic has presented both new challenges and opportunities for migrants' rights campaigners like ourselves. It has also highlighted and deepened existing inequality, exclusion and injustice faced by migrants.

SYMAAG rose to the challenge posed by the pandemic which disproportionately affects BAME and low income communities. We continue to hold outdoor protests and actions where possible taking safety into account. We moved our organising meetings online and increased their frequency from monthly to fortnightly reflecting extra commitments and the importance of staying in touch with each other and with our partner organisations. We worked to end the digital exclusion of our members through practical support.

Online organising also has advantages: practical barriers of transport costs, travelling time and domestic/work responsibilities are reduced and we were able to include activists from around the UK (and beyond) regularly in our meetings. This has been particularly useful in co-ordinating the sharing of information and organising around the issue of asylum accommodation with asylum tenants more easily able to attend our meetings. It has also raised questions about security at online meetings while maintaining accessibility and welcoming new activists to online events.

Asylum Housing, Urban House and hotels

Along with asylum tenants we were delighted that in October 2019 G4S lost their asylum housing contracts, including in our region. We hope we played a part in their downfall and we assumed things couldn't get worse.. But the new 10 year asylum accommodation contracts remained in the hands of private companies including Mears Group in Yorkshire and Humberside. Despite initial agreements SYMAAG made with Mears on room sharing, quality of housing and tenants' privacy within months some asylum tenants were describing Mears as "worse than G4S". Their testimonies formed the basis for our submissions to parliamentary committees. The Public Accounts Committee described Mears (and Serco and Clearsprings) asylum housing as unacceptable and condemned the imminent dangers to health for residents at Urban House and those housed in hotels.

The failure of Mears to provide housing resulted in unacceptably long stays in Initial Accommodation Centres like Urban House in Wakefield. Our members have worked with Urban House residents before and we learned about the crowded and grim conditions there, particularly for children and people with serious disabilities.

Then Covid turned Urban House into a serious health hazard. In March residents protested for soap in the bathrooms, PPE, translated health advice, decent food and an end to people forced to share small bedrooms. SYMAAG helped gain regional and national media attention and political support for residents' demands. John Grayson continued to take a national lead, documenting and supporting tenants and residents' battles and calling for Home Office oversight and inspection of Urban House. In March he warned of the particular and severe health dangers to the largely BAME residents there and in asylum housing in our region.

We supported Urban House residents during the Covid outbreak in July giving practical support to residents moved to derelict asylum housing and in hotels with no asylum support. Despite our demands there were no significant safety improvements when Urban House re-opened in September. We continue to give practical and political support to residents and to call for the ending of the Mears Group asylum accommodation contract.

We responded to the increased need for practical support to asylum tenants by forming the Yorkshire Refugees Foodbank along with Calais support networks, Cllr Zahira Naz, Kurdish community organisations and a wide range of activists and organisations. The YRF is now well established and providing vital practical support to asylum seekers in UH, hotels and around Yorkshire. We have been heartened by community donations, enthusiastic volunteers and expect YRF to grow in capacity.

We are concerned about the resumption of asylum evictions, particularly dangerous during a winter pandemic. We work with the newly formed Sheffield Against Asylum Evictions, Sheffield Acorn Renters Union, Sheffield Student Action for Refugees, ASSIST and sympathetic Sheffield councillors to halt these or to provide suitable alternative accommodation.

Zimbabwe, Marian and Justice for Simba

We continued to oppose Government attempts to deport to Zimbabwe, despite the obvious dangers. Our Zimbabwean members shared their experience of resisting Home Office intimidation, detention and deportation and worked with Zimbabwean community associations, political parties and national media to fight for Home Office accountability.

In July 2019 we were overjoyed to learn that our long-standing member Marian Machekeyanga from Zimbabwe had won her claim for asylum after a 15 year battle! "We need dignity, we deserve dignity" said Marian at a rally against the hostile environment outside Vulcan House Home Office. Marian has always spoken out for other asylum seekers and gained huge local community and political support, speaking at trade union, community and Labour Party meetings

But we were saddened to hear that Simba Mujakachi had experienced life threatening health problems at the time of Home Office pressure on Zimbabwean asylum seekers. And shocked that Simba's access to healthcare was limited and charged at £100,000.

We worked with Migrants Organise, Medact and Docs Not Cops to get justice for Simba and to organise against restrictions to healthcare access for asylum seekers. Simba's story and the issue of health charging has become widely known with national media coverage and a dozens of protests in October as part of a Solidarity Knows No Borders national day of action.

We will continue to support Simba until he gets justice. Along with local and national partners we will organise against restrictions on access to healthcare – an issue that truly affects us all now.

Morton Hall, 'Foreign National Offenders' and prisons

For 10 years SYMAAG has campaigned for the closure of Morton Hall detention centre. Many of our friends and fellow campaigners have been detained there so we were pleased to hear its closure announced in July. But In 2021 it will revert to being used as a prison. We know that many prisons hold migrants including 'Foreign National Offenders'. One Sheffield-based Iranian man Hamid Baygi was detained at Morton Hall for committing a minor offence after living in the UK for 50 years. We successfully campaigned for his release but remain concerned that migrants committing criminal offences suffer disproportionate punishment including the threat of deportation.

Locally we continued to work closely with our partners These Walls Must Fall and Voice for Voiceless Immigration Detainees Yorkshire with a healthy overlap in memberships improving co-ordination between the groups. We worked with activists and artists in Lincoln to help raise awareness about nearby Morton Hall and contributed to a public meeting, exhibition, book and film about immigration detention. We worked with University of Sheffield Migration Studies Department to organise an online event about immigration detention internationally including a discussion with Kurdish author and ex-Manus Island detainee Behrouz Boochani.

We are concerned that – using the pandemic as a pretext – newly arrived asylum seekers are often housed at detention centres, ex-military barracks, holding centres and hotels where they are in practice detained with much-reduced levels of asylum support and little access to legal services.

We worked for the release of all detainees from Morton Hall and other detention centres during the pandemic where conditions are an imminent threat to life.

Sheffield – City of Sanctuary or hostile environment?

Despite its status as the UK's first City of Sanctuary we found that Sheffield City Council and police have been working with immigration enforcement to report and arrest Sheffielders "suspected of being illegal immigrants". 1600 Sheffield residents (a higher proportion than most cities) were arrested between 2013–2017 as "suspected illegal migrants" with immigration enforcement staff based at police stations. We were alerted in 2019 to Sheffield City Council's (SCC) use of the Government's Controlling Migration Fund which had led SCC to "make several referrals of undocumented migrants to the UK Border Agency" via its Private Housing Standards team.

SYMAAG mobilised protests at SCC meetings (including sympathetic councillors), questioned SCC cabinet members on this practice and asked how it was compatible with being a City of Sanctuary. We eventually received an assurance that SCC policy and practice on its attitude to hostile environment policies would be 'reviewed'. We await the results of this review.

SYMAAG members contributed to comparative studies on UK Cities of Sanctuary and the Sanctuary City movement in the US where local authorities do not cooperate with immigration enforcement agencies.

We are concerned about the treatment of our member Rodrigo Edema, former employee at City of Sanctuary Sheffield (COSS). Particularly with the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, we are disappointed that Rodrigo was the only paid BAME worker at COSS when he left. While we support the work of COSS, we continue to work with Rodrigo in seeking

justice and in combatting racism in the charity sector as well as in society as a whole.

Other campaigns

Eritrea: alongside Sheffield's Eritrean community we organised a demonstration in January 2020 to highlight the abuse suffered by refugees stranded in Libyan detention centres and the role of European governments in forcibly preventing refugees crossing the Mediterranean Sea to claim asylum.

Kurdistan: we joined Kurdish community organisations to protest against Turkish military attacks on Kurdish areas of Syria with the tacit support of European governments and to support Kurdish asylum seekers in the UK

Yemen: we worked with the Yemeni Community Association to demonstrate against UK arms sales to Saudi Arabia and their use against Yemen causing many people to flee. We also worked alongside newly-arrived Yemeni refugees who were housed in Sheffield hotels with no income or support.

2019 General Election: we organised a well-attended election hustings with candidates from all major parties (except Conservatives) who were questioned on their parties' attitude towards asylum rights, the hostile environment, Justice For Simba and healthcare charging for migrants.

Parliamentary work: We have worked closely with sympathetic MPs and Shadow Cabinet members. Nationally, Diane Abbott MP took up the issue of threatened deportations to Zimbabwe and the failures of the privatised asylum housing system. Locally, Labour Party MPs Olivia Blake and Paul Blomfield have been responsive to our requests for them to raise issues on Urban House, Zimbabwe, Justice for Simba and the resumption of reporting at Vulcan House. They raised questions in Parliament and directly to those Cabinet Ministers responsible. In the House of Lords Green Party Baroness Natalie Bennett raised the issue of asylum housing and dangers to tenants' health and gave practical support our work around Urban House.

John Grayson has continued to supply vital detailed evidence to Parliamentary Committees particularly on asylum accommodation and dangers to health facing tenants and residents during the pandemic.

Media and research work

We have effectively used regional media contacts to support our campaigns alongside residents of Urban House IAC, asylum tenants, Justice for Simba and access to healthcare. We continue to maintain a national media profile through Independent, Guardian and Channel 4 media contacts and also the BBC Persian World Service.

We have had analytical articles published by Institute for Race Relations, Open Democracy and Discover Society and contributed to numerous academic research projects on issues ranging from privatised asylum housing, austerity and migration, European immigration detention to organising precarious workers in Cameroon.

Locally we have made useful new contacts in mainstream and community media outlets and continue to be a 'go-to' organisation for comment on many aspects of asylum seekers' resistance to the hostile environment. We have also worked with many local trainee journalists in Sheffield.

Our social media reach has grown with our Twitter and Facebook accounts being administered by myself and Manuchehr and we thank Sam Musarika for his continued work

maintaining and redesigning our website. As SYMAAG photographer Manuchehr has expertly covered our many public protests and actions.

We still need a publicity officer to design and produce SYMAAG leaflets, cards, stickers, T shirts, banners etc. Volunteers please!

Finance

We are all volunteers but our work is financially sustained by donations which have increased this year (see separate SYMAAG 2019–2020 Financial Report). We thank Rotherham Unite the Union, Mount Pleasant Park Football Club, St Marks Church and Broomhill Labour Party members for donations and fundraisers which have included a disco night, a 5 a side football tournament, a 200km sponsored run (thanks Sean) and a US protest folk song fundraiser, We have also received many donations using Paypal, a new feature on our website.

SYMAAG Development

We are proud that – after 13 years of existence – most of SYMAAG's Executive Committee are experienced activists with direct (sometimes ongoing) experience of the UK asylum system. Our capacity to contact, work with, and be trusted by refugee communities greatly benefits from this.

Thanks to all members of SYMAAG's Executive Committee. In particular, thank you to our co-Chairs and key activists Phillis, Violet and Manuchehr who have chaired sometimes difficult meetings with diplomacy and efficiency. Their contributions to maintaining SYMAAG are often unseen but vital to us. Local historian and SYMAAG Executive member David Price has continued to effectively lobby local MPs on our behalf. And special thanks to John Grayson who, though no longer an Executive Committee member, continues to be an outspoken and leading advocate for the rights of asylum tenants and residents.

During this pandemic we've seen existing inequalities and exclusion amplified, But for months asylum evictions were halted, detention centres emptied, the terrifying routine of reporting to places like Vulcan House Home Office suspended and as one refugee remarked "the sky didn't fall in". A return to 'normal' post-pandemic life must take account of this.

Finally, in response to a question about the state of asylum accommodation from a local MP the Home Office response included this statement: 'We are grateful to SYMAAG for the significant role it plays in many of our schemes in supporting asylum seekers within the UK.' While it's always nice to have your work recognised, our efforts wouldn't be necessary if the Home Office stopped its policy of deliberately creating a hostile environment for people seeking asylum. We aim to play a significant role in ending that policy.

Stuart Crosthwaite
Co-Secretary, South Yorkshire Migration and Asylum Action Group

