

Defend asylum seekers!

By Dale Street

NEW social security regulations introduced by the Tories on 5 February are leaving more and more asylum-seekers destitute.

Under these regulations, any asylum seeker who fails to apply for asylum on arrival is ineligible for welfare benefits. Any asylum seeker whose asylum claim is refused is barred from claiming benefits for the duration of the appeals procedure.

According to the Refugee Council, over 70 asylum seekers in London alone lost their entitlement to benefits during the first week of operation of the new regulations. By the end of February the figure had reached 200.

Churches and charities are trying to plug the gap created by the Tories' ruthless decision to deny most asylum seekers the right to claim welfare benefits.

The Salvation Army is distributing sleeping bags to asylum seekers forced to sleep rough. Oxfam is donating plastic sheeting. And the Red Cross is distributing blankets and second-hand clothes. Some churches in London have been used as night-shelters, but these are already full.

The Tories pressed ahead with implementing the new regulations in the face of total condemnation of their proposals by the Social Security Advisory Committee.

The changes have been condemned by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on the grounds that they violate Britain's obligations under international treaties.

The UNHCR has also accused the Tories of using "inappropriate and emotive" arguments in seeking to justify the new social security regulations.

Legal challenges to the regulations have been unsuccessful. In a test case at the end of March the courts ruled that, however regrettable the consequences of the new regulations might be, the government was fully within its powers to implement them.

In addition to trying to starve asylum-seekers out of the country, the Tories are also pushing new legislation through Parliament which will make it even more difficult for victims of persecution to win recognition as refugees in this country.

The Asylum and Immigration Bill (AIB) empowers the Home Secretary to create a 'white list' of supposedly safe countries. Asylum claims lodged by nationals of those countries will automatically be deemed to be bogus.

The AIB also restricts the right of appeal



Photo: Paul Freely

to many asylum-seekers and allows a right of appeal for certain categories of asylum-seekers only after deportation.

A series of new immigration offences will be created by the AIB, and police and immigration officers will be given increased powers to track down those deemed guilty of such 'crimes'.

Finally, in addition to scrapping the right of asylum-seekers to Child Benefit and access to public sector housing, the AIB also makes employers liable to a fine of up to £5,000 if they employ immigrants whose legal status does not include permission to work.

The AIB is currently going through the House of Lords and is due for implementation in early summer.

Labour has opposed the social security regulations and the AIB. Three line whips have been imposed when there have been votes on the regulations and legislation in

Parliament. But Labour's opposition has been muted.

It has not given any pledge that the next Labour government will restore the right of asylum-seekers to claim welfare benefits. And in parliamentary debates on the AIB the Liberal-Democrats have had a much higher profile than Labour.

The Labour Party leadership is running scared of putting up a real fight against the Tories' attacks on asylum-seekers. They oppose the regulations and legislation in order to keep on good terms with *Guardian* readers but they are not prepared to make the Tories' racism a theme in the approaching General Election campaigning.

The labour movement must stop the Tories' onslaught on refugees and demand the reinstatement of their right to welfare benefits. And it must demand that its leadership make a priority of campaigning in defence of the right of asylum-seekers.

Mass protest outside
Bow St Magistrates' Court
to protest at the trial of 5
members of the Movement
for Justice, arrested at the
"Orange Paint Protest"
Monday 15 April
9.30am
Nearest tube: Covent Garden

**Campaign against
the Asylum and
Immigration Bill**

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Saturday 20 April
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Supported by the TUC
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