

Labour Energy Forum, Lesbians and Gays Support the Migrants and Platform London

Mass deportations - Theresa May and New Labour's Shameful Secret

- Chair: Spokesperson from Lesbian and Gays Support the Migrants
- Diane Abbott MP (Shadow Home Secretary)
- Aderonke Apata (LGBT activist, Labour member, former Yarl's Wood detainee)
- Jo Ram (End Deportations, on trial for preventing a mass deportation flight)
- Shanthi Sivakumaran (Haldane Society of Socialist Lawyers)
- Rachel Shabi (journalist and author)
- Owen Jones (journalist)

Jo Ram

Jo began by explaining the story of how her and 12 others blockaded a flight deporting around 50 detainees from Stanstead Airport to Nigeria. The Crown Prosecution Service have charged her with a terrorism related offence under the aviation and maritime act. Ram stated that End Deportations are against all kinds of deportations but focus specifically on mass deportations which involves deporting 40-60 migrants in a private aircraft hired by the home office. She said that Titan Airways offers this service. It was first introduced by New Labour in 2001 and serves ex colonial countries (e.g. Ghana, Pakistan, Nigeria) or regions that the UK has recently played a role in war (Afghanistan or Iraq). She said that the Home Office claim they need to use private charter flights because these people are difficult to remove, but in reality, they are pressurised to fill their seats and therefore purposefully pull people from communities that they feel are eligible for deportation. She said that many only have 5/6 days to say goodbye to their life in the UK.

Ram stated that irony is that the asylum seekers are fleeing prosecution, be it religious or political, and the UK is deporting them on similar grounds. She said that many have been in the UK for 10 or more years and have strong ties here. She said that it is unsurprising that many face violence on the flights and it took 10 years before the home office allowed an independent inspector on board. She said that as there are no passengers from the public to witness what goes on, security guards are able to get away with whatever they want. Knowledge of what goes on during the flights relies on testimonies. She said that it costs £35,000 a year to detain and deport a person but only £12,000 to provide decent housing. Ram said that a future Labour government must ban mass deportations.

Aderonke Apata

Apata mentioned how she lived with pain, agony and terror for thirteen years. She said that she is delighted that people think they should take action on behalf of those who refuse to. She explained that she sees mass deportation as ethnic cleansing and said that detention centres are entirely unethical, referencing Ram's point about how they are desperate to fill up the flights so they actively target certain ethnic groups. She mentioned how people arrive in these countries and are completely stranded, as they have stronger ties with the UK.

Diane Abbott

Abbott stated that the problem with anything to do with immigration is the process of dehumanisation. She said that the mass deportation on chartered planes is a brutal way of responding to the current immigration panic. Abbott stated that many people deported to Nigeria are not even from Nigeria (same with Jamaica), which says a lot about the hurried nature of the deportation process. She said that in the 1990s, when deportation was introduced, there was a lack of transparency and due process surrounding mass deportation and the UK is the only EU country that doesn't put a time limit on the detention of immigrants. She finished off by saying that migrants are treated in a way that is not fair or reasonable, and that they the fair and humane treatment of migrants is extremely important for Jeremy Corbyn.

Shanthi Sivakumaran

Shanthi drew the attention away from the mass deportation on chartered flights and spoke about her involvement with the deportation of EEA nationals, particularly Eastern Europeans. She said that Romanians top the list of forced removals and said that there has been a clear shift over the past two years with a 25% increase in the deportation of EEA nationals each year. She spoke of the existence of a generic removal process for all ethnic groups, and criticised homeless charities for referring migrants when they're supposed to be supporting them. She said that more and more hostile policies are being introduced against immigration, with migration always being seen and reported on as negative. She said that there needs to be a more positive approach to immigration, as these people are not just here to claim asylum but they're here to have lives. Shanthi also stated that many people are unrepresented in the struggle to find judicial reviews and there needs to be a reintroduction of legal aid for immigration aid. She also said that the government definitely needs to introduce a time limit on detention like the rest of EU countries.

Rachel Shabi

Shabi briefly attacked Tony Blair for his obsession with scapegoating asylum seekers, creating a culture of hostility surrounding them. She said that there was no real defence of migration at that time. She that there needs to be a change in the narrative surrounding EU migrants and asylum seekers.

Owen Jones

Jones finished off by stating that there needs to be an end to the scapegoating, racism, violence, bigotry and dehumanisation of migrants. She said that Theresa May was Home Secretary when a van went around telling migrants to 'go home'. He also accused her of lying about an illegal immigrant who avoided deportation because of his pet cat. Jones mentioned that LGBT couples have had to film themselves having sex to prove that it is too dangerous for them to be deported to areas where they would be prosecuted heavily. He said that an independent monitoring board found that the deporting of migrants on chartered flights falls short of humane treatment. He said that politicians need to be held accountable for blaming migrants for the mess that this country is in.