

Wales: Yes to Refugees/No to Fascists and Racists

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Geoff Ryan reports on the ongoing campaigns both in support of and hostility to refugees at the Stradey Park Hotel near Llanelli.

Contents

- [THE UK GOVERNMENT'S RACIST \(...\)](#)
- [LOCAL OPPOSITION AND CONCERNS](#)
- [THE ROLE OF STAND UP TO \(...\)](#)
- [DEBUNKING MISCONCEPTIONS \(...\)](#)

The Welsh Labour Government has declared that Cymru is a Nation of Sanctuary which welcomes refugees. That is something to be applauded and supported. It is certainly very different to the attitude of the UK Tory Government and of Keir Starmer. However, events near Llanelli show that there is still a long way to go to make this a reality.

THE UK GOVERNMENT'S RACIST POLICIES AND LABELING OF REFUGEES

The UK government has spent a lot of time and energy attempting to justify its appalling racist policies towards refugees. And beyond this paragraph I will only use the term 'refugees'. The relatively recent term 'asylum seekers' was coined because 'refugees' automatically produces a feeling of empathy, hopefully solidarity with those seeking refuge from persecution and oppression. By contrast 'asylum seekers' especially when preceded by 'bogus' is designed to present those seeking refuge as not 'genuine' and to whip up hostility to them, to encourage people to fear them and to massively exaggerate the numbers. Rather than empathize with their situation people have been encouraged to do whatever they can to prevent refugees being housed in Britain. That is exactly what is going on at the protest camp outside the Stradey Park Hotel in Llanelli.

It is somewhat bizarre that the protests are taking place at the Stradey Park Hotel given that the UK government is constantly telling us that they want to move refugees out of hotels in order to save money. Their preferred option is to deport them to Rwanda or anywhere else willing to accept bribes to take refugees. Since the Court of Appeal has made that impossible at present then the next option chosen by the Tories is to house refugees on barges off the coast of Britain. That has also run into problems with the Fire Brigades Union arguing that the Bibby Stockholm, anchored off Portland, Dorset is a potential death trap, with comparisons to Grenfell Tower. The Tories claimed that the FBU objections to the scheme are part of a plot by the Labour Party to continue to house people in hotels. Yet it is the same Tory government that has chosen to house between 207 and 241 refugees, squashed into 77 rooms, at the Stradey Park Hotel.

LOCAL OPPOSITION AND CONCERNS ABOUT REFUGEE HOUSING

The Stradey Park Hotel is a four-star hotel in the village of Furnace on the outskirts of Llanelli, a popular venue for wedding receptions as well as housing a spa. All wedding plans have subsequently been cancelled (I know one young woman who has had to rearrange her wedding at short notice), and all 95 staff have been made redundant. So, if refugees are finally moved to Stradey Park Hotel they won't be moving into a luxury hotel run by welcoming and well-trained staff.

The refugee holding centre will be managed by Clearsprings Ready Homes on behalf of the owners, Sterling Woodrow. According to openDemocracy Daily Newsletter of July 28 Clearsprings were accused of 'treating [a] migrant like [a] slave'. In fact, two-thirds of the complaints made to the Home Office helpline Migrant Help were made about hotels managed by Clearsprings Ready Homes. These claims include a child being left outside in the cold and sexual harassment, as well as complaints about racism, harassment and discrimination. In the year ending 31 January 2022 Clearsprings made a profit of £28,012,487, with its 3 directors sharing dividends of nearly 328 million.

Opposition to the plan has come from very different sources and perspectives:

1. Carmarthenshire County Council (dominated by Plaid Cymru), Llanelli Council, Labour MP Nia Griffith and Labour MS Lee Waters, Welsh Refugee Council, Stand Up to Racism
2. Local Residents
3. The far right: Voice of Wales and Patriotic Alternative

Carmarthenshire County Council has expressed concerns about housing so many refugees in a single place. It prefers to settle refugees throughout Cymru. The Council failed in a legal challenge to prevent the hotel being used to house refugees but only argued about a legal technicality (the change of use of the hotel) rather than challenge the whole logic of shutting people away who have fled from wars and oppression. The Welsh Refugee Council took a similar view of opposition to housing so many refugees in one place.

In addition, Llanelli council raised issues about the effects on local services of the introduction of a large number of people at one time, which would increase the population of Furnace by about 50% immediately. While opposition to the scheme from Nia Griffith is welcome, she would perhaps do well to reflect on what effect her cheerleading for NATO and its military interventions might have on the need for tens of thousand of people to flee their homes and seek refuge in Britain.

While the Welsh Government does not have responsibility for refugee policy, they have made clear their opposition to this move by the UK government. As usual the Tory government completely bypassed the Senedd, the Welsh government and the people of Llanelli.

THE ROLE OF STAND UP TO RACISM IN PROMOTING SOLIDARITY

Stand Up to Racism have been exemplary in organising solidarity with refugees. They are clear that refugees are welcome in Cymru, in Carmarthenshire and in Llanelli and have consistently opposed the far-right's attempts to use the issue to recruit and should be congratulated on their determined work.

Local residents have expressed opposition in different ways. For some the main issue is the effect such a large influx will have on already struggling services: how will schools cope, will it be even more difficult to see a GP. These are perfectly legitimate concerns, indeed legitimate concerns

whenever there is a sudden increase in population in an area. In my own village there is considerable opposition to plans for a new housing estate without provision for dealing with an increase in traffic on an already busy road, where children will go to school since the existing school is already stretched beyond capacity, how people will get an appointment at the local GP practice when the current population find it near impossible to do so. All these are entirely legitimate concerns for residents of Furnace.

The local protesters are also annoyed about the complete lack of consultation with them by the Home Office and the UK government. This is a concern shared by the Welsh Government, Carmarthenshire County Council, Llanelli Council, all of whom were completely bypassed by Sunak, Braverman and co.

However, despite their protestations that they are not racist there have undoubtedly been racist signs, racist chanting and racist opinions expressed at the picket and protest camp outside the hotel. 'Welsh Lives Matter' is a racist slogan in this context because it implies that refugees' lives don't matter. Black Lives Matter never implied that the lives of other people didn't matter except in the fevered brains of racists, fascists and their apologists: it was a response to a society, and especially to a police force, for whom black lives were worth considerably less than those of white people.

It has been reported that some of the protesters have suggested that local shops should refuse to serve refugees. What is that if not racism and xenophobia? Or comments such as 'let the decision makers take them in'. These are not comments from people who welcome refugees. They are comments from people who don't want refugees in the Stradey Park Hotel or anywhere else for that matter. In Llanelli the opposition to refugees per se is noticeably higher than at Tees Port or Portland where local people have opposed the deployment of barges as totally unsuitable for human beings and expressing empathy with refugees.

And the far-right has been active in the camp. Earlier this year the attempt by Patriotic Alternative to whip up hatred against a hostel for refugees in Llanilltud Fawr/Llantwit Major ended in abject failure when they were massively outnumbered on the streets by local people. Support for the pro-refugee campaign came from Llantwit Major FC, local faith groups, local cafes and craft shops, a local DJ among others. A second attempt by the fascists to march in Llantwit Major also came to naught.

In Llanelli Voice of Wales hater Stan Robinson has been involved in setting up the protest camp outside the hotel. As Far Right Watch Wales has reported far-right activists have been involved in the SOS PAN (Save Our Stradey Park and Neighbourhood) Facebook group. Alek Yerbury, an admirer of Franco and Hitler with a record of organising anti-refugee protests in the North of England, Darren Harries and Jonathan Murray have all posted recently. The involvement of the far-right has not been welcomed by all the local residents of Furnace, with many withdrawing from SOS PAN. Welsh folk singer Dafydd Iwan strongly objected to his stirring anthem Yma O Hyd (now strongly associated with the Wales/Cymru Football team) being sung by right-wing protesters at the camp.

However, the Involvement of Voice of Wales and the rump Patriotic Alternative is a serious threat to any refugees that are moved into the hotel. They have been able to get some support in Llanelli, not least because so much nonsense about refugees is spread by the media and right-wing politicians (including much of the Parliamentary Labour Party and its supporters) and subsequently believed by many people. They have been aided by Rishi Sunak's 'Stop the Boats' obsession which chimes with what the far-right claim.

DEBUNKING MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT REFUGEES AND THEIR IMPACT

There is a widespread belief that Britain houses a huge number of refugees and that it has taken in far more refugees than most other countries. 'We' are supposedly a 'soft touch' compared to other countries. There is not a shred of truth in these stories.

The vast majority of refugees are found in poor countries bordering the state from which they fled. The UK doesn't even come close to making the top 25. Turkey, with over 3.6 million, easily has more refugees than any other state. As of 2022 Germany, Russia, Poland, France, Czechia, Italy, Sweden and Spain, at a minimum, all hosted far more refugees than the UK. Apart from the USA all the other states hosting large numbers of refugees are in the poorest parts of the world, Africa, Asia and Latin America.

This is even more the case when the proportion of the number of refugees compared to the population of a state is taken into account. The only European countries in the Top 10 are Montenegro (5.2%) and Czechia (4.2%) in both cases almost solely Ukrainians. Both trail a long way behind Lebanon (22% of the total population). The UK figure is 0.54%, one of the lowest in the world.

Contrary to popular belief refugees do not take 'our' jobs. They are not allowed to work while waiting for their application for refugee status to be processed. They may have useful, often desperately needed, skills such as health professionals or engineers but they are not allowed to put those skills into practice. Instead, they have to live on a £5.84 per day handout while living in often in appalling conditions. Conditions that are going to get worse if the Tories have their way.

Once they get refugee status this is not the end of their problems. Refugees only have 28 days after getting refugee status to find accommodation and apply for mainstream benefits before they are evicted from refugee accommodation. Not surprisingly many become homeless at this stage.

There are also claims that the vast majority of those seeking refuge are not refugees but 'economic migrants'. But are they not refugees from grinding poverty, a poverty for which western capitalism is largely responsible? Did western capitalist states not invade their countries and plunder their resources? And is western capitalism not primarily responsible for the terrible fires and floods that are currently devastating large parts of the planet?

Poverty (and now the threat of ecological collapse) has often been the driving force behind people choosing to migrate from the land in which they happened, by chance, to have been born to somewhere with better prospects for themselves and future generations. White people moved from Europe to the Americas, to parts of Africa, to Asia and Australasia because they believed they would get a better future there. In the 19th century my wife's family moved from Britain to New Zealand. In the late 20th century, she moved to London. So, is she an immigrant to Britain from New Zealand or is she a British expat returning home? Why should people be forced to remain in that little bit of the world in which they were born and not experience other countries, other cultures?

As an ecosocialist I firmly believe that people should have the right to live wherever they choose. I also strongly believe that a worker in Cymru has a billion things in common with a worker in Afghanistan, Albania, Algeria, Bangladesh, Barbados & Bulgaria – all the way to Yemen, Zambia and Zimbabwe. But next to nothing in common with a capitalist, however Welsh they may be.

As Karl Marx put it: Workers of All Countries Unite.

Geoff Ryan

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P.S.

- Anti*Capitalist Resistance. 5 August 2023:
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/yes-to-refugees-no-to-fascists-and-racists/>