

Table of Contents

No One Is Legal 1

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ByUnterschereber

Where the struggle for migrants' rights can be risky and divisive, informal organising by 'illegals' is a means to ensure survival. But both formal and informal organising can combine to protect an essential buffer zone of invisibility for undocumented workers — writes Unterschreber

The delirious belief that 'Britain has lost control of its borders' has been affirmed repeatedly of late by Citizens, i.e. those people well enough served by the current border control regime to be able to imagine they have an interest in its survival. In reality, however, the spread of this hallucination more or less coincides with the build up of the most severe restrictions ever imposed on non-European foreigners' freedom to enter and stay in the country.[1] The Points-Based System due to come into force next year will tighten criteria even further, while 'democratising' border policing by legally obliging Citizens to act as informers [see Javier, 'Points-Based Peonage', page 42 of this issue].

The leaky border is by no means just a 'tabloid' (middleclass-brow slang for 'dumb prole') fancy. It is perpetuated, for instance, in generally well-informed, sceptical publications as divergent ideologically as *Lobster* and *Private Eye*. Thus even the 'critical' elements within the expert commentator classes betray total obliviousness to the everyday reality of immigration policing that surrounds them; an ignorance compounded by a sorry failure of imagination. Not only have the pundits themselves evidently never had to cross the UK or Schengen borders, much less tried to live and work, without the privileges of Euro-nationality; it would seem that nothing in the life experience of the sheltered social circles they move in gives them any clue either.[2] (As a corrective, I suggest a simple comparative experiment: travel between London and Paris by Eurostar one way and Megabus the other, and watch the border guards at work.)

[IMAGE]

Image: Lee Galpin, *Rights of Man*, detail

Perhaps such disconnection from reality is not so surprising on the part of those inside the gilded cocoon that Pasolini called 'the Palazzo'. What really is impressive, though, is that in spite of the unprecedented apparatus of prohibition and enforcement in place, plus the constant flow of ex-entrants back out of the country, enough new non-'Europeans' get through at all to maintain any kind of collective presence, much less serve as a pretext for racist panic.[3] Silvia Federici wrote in 1990 of the apparent contradiction by which, 'according to the statistics gathered by international agencies, most people in Africa ought to be dead, since their income per capita is far below subsistence', whereas the 'dark' continent is actually 'one of the liveliest places on the planet'.[4] The reason for the pseudo-paradox, of course, lay in the resilience of collective 'informal' reproduction practices that don't register in computer models, and which the headquarters of statistically viable 'economic activity' have not ceased trying to stamp out. Or in other words, physical, intellectual and social struggle, which may or may not be acknowledged as 'political'.

A superficially similar logic can be seen at work in Britain and the other wings of the European fortress inasmuch as, legally and statistically speaking, it's 'impossible' for most migrants to be here, especially without displaying signs of the pitiful dependency entailed by 'asylum seeker' status (whether in formal detention or its annex, the voucher queue). Yet, as the result of intense struggle, there they are, in living spite of demographic measure, and by no means helplessly entrusting life or death to state or NGO decision or activist advocacy. Once again, it comes down to the effectiveness of 'informal' social mechanisms which not only do not court 'rights', but actively confound visibility, let alone representation.

To acknowledge the function of this undocumented action does not mean celebrating it indiscriminately: the rate of exploitation in the informal economy organised on 'community' lines is well-known, as is the smooth incorporation of the absolute surplus value pumped from it into the same 'legitimate' capitalism which, without the slightest contradiction, also demands aggressive border controls. But the struggle going on at this level, and its position in the 'wider economy' is central to the questions that need to be answered for the meaning of any programme of 'organising around illegality' to be clear.

One organised group of migrants struck an illegal, physical blow for collective freedom on 4 August this year by breaking out of Campsfield immigration prison in Oxfordshire at the end of a mass hunger strike.[5] The No Border Network quickly responded with solidarity demonstrations at immigration 'reporting' (i.e. surrendering to potential detention and deportation) centres across the country.[6] Meanwhile Imam Dr. Abduljalil Sajid, ex-chairman of the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, advised the escapees to give themselves up.[7] In general, though, the historic breach of internment was reported as an ordinary police incident. The BBC gave star billing to one Bill Smith, who privately 'apprehended', imprisoned and delivered to the militarised manhunt a fugitive who knocked on his door 'begging for assistance'. The story 'died' when 11 (or 14, depending on which account you read) of the 26 escapees remained at large after their photos were published to encourage further vigilante kidnappings. The limited success of the jailbreak, then, is measured by, or at least corresponds to, its sustained disappearance from 'the public eye' (i.e. representation in bourgeois media and competitive politics), rather than by any visibility as advertisement for the 'rights' requested by Imam Sajid.

The use of such direct methods in unrepresented struggle by rightless *extracomunitari* is the theme of *Evasioni e rivolte (Escapes and Rebellions)*[8], a new book by robustly contested Mute contributor Emilio Quadrelli.[9] It mostly consists of interviews with escapees from Italian immigration prisons ('CPT', literally 'centres of temporary permanence'). Quadrelli quotes statistics indicating a shift since mid-2005 in detainees' response to conditions, with individual self-mutilation, petty gangsterism and violence between nationally aligned prisoner factions tending to be replaced by violence co-ordinated across nationality lines against the institutions and their guards, sometimes leading to collectively planned escape.[10]

The book works as a polemic against the image of illegal immigrants as tragic victims, but the point is not to fetishise escape from detention. Rather, the CPT episodes are restored to the context of the speakers' experience as migrant workers, with 'work' understood to include all varieties of formal, informal, semi-legal and 'criminal' employment, whether in regular industrial, casual, domestic or opportunistic street settings. Thus the stories can be said to be 'about' the use in labour discipline of 'illegality' and of racial stratification between 'illegals', and the comparative effectiveness of different tactics of resistance, flight or counter-attack. Particular emphasis is placed on the role of immigrant 'community leaders' and public spokesmen in managing the flow of business between 'official' and 'illegal' economies, reproducing class hierarchy both within the 'communities' and between them on an overall social level. (For example a Moroccan factory owner 'sponsors' extended family members'

legal entry into Italy then withholds their visas, effectively indenturing their labour in his sweatshop unless they wish to fall into the hands of his paid-off local police. Or Roma elders periodically 'sell' younger travellers into the CPT in a deal with the city council to postpone demolition of their site.)[11] In one story after another, capture and CPT internment results from various kinds of bosses' reaction to the migrants' semi-organised attempts at resistance. Then, with remarkable regularity, after initial helplessness and despair the detainees refine their co-operation and planning and extend it beyond single 'ethnic community' lines, thereby attaining relative power within the CPT and eventually escaping. They generally end by saying they have survived within illegality 'on their own terms' since escape thanks to the same forms of small group self-organisation and carefully circumscribed violence that got them out of the prison.

Claims like these for something like collective self-sufficiency 'outside the system' are highly dubious, of course especially where the same speakers have eloquently described the integration into 'legitimate' capital of the 'criminal' economic circuits which now apparently support their independence. But then the narrators' reasons for preferring prudent self-mythologising to factual detail when talking about their present lives are also not hard to imagine. The extravagant 'military' feats that occur in the stories even before they reach 'happy' open-endings may or may not have been substituted for compromising 'realistic' detail. What certainly is realistic, however, is the speakers' suspicion that effective struggle not only has little to do with public profile, but may actually be endangered by it; their awareness that what amounts to invisibility from certain points of view may be essential to struggle's practical success.

Any attempt to 'organise around illegality', then, would perhaps have to bear these points in mind. Yet it's hard to see how it would be possible to do so where the struggle revolves around 'rights' (e.g. to trade union representation). 'Rights within illegality' remains an oxymoron however far the terms are stretched, because 'rights', by definition, must be legislated into existence and the law publicly enforced, otherwise they're merely slogans that call for something on uncertain grounds without obtaining it in practice. To raise this problem is not just semantic nit-picking: unfortunately it's all too easy to imagine the unintended (by sincere campaigners at least) effects that could arise if limited legal rights were granted, under trade union tutelage, to some 'illegal' workers within a framework that ultimately maintained their 'illegal immigrant' status. The workers concerned would still not have obtained the full freedom of movement, association and withdrawal of labour that they'd need in order to respond to bosses' blackmail with independent counter-coercion, whether collectively or individually. Yet the new legal rights would be sure to entail legal responsibilities, probably forcing the workers to become institutionally visible and thereby to lose the last resort option of disappearance from intolerable work situations and from the immigration police, whose powers over them would remain. In fact a situation like this might even increase dependency and stratification within the lowest, most exploited labour strata. The 'lucky' semi-semi-legals would acquire a new sponsor/overseer in the union, outside whose umbrella they'd fall back into supposed helplessness. Meanwhile a new hierarchical division could arise between this group and those who are still simply illegal, stimulating yet more of the desperate competition between workers that the whole system is designed to cultivate.

However these problems with 'union rights' as a campaign goal, and the habit of measuring immigrants' willingness to struggle by their union participation, certainly don't mean action by workers organised in unions must always be useless or counter-productive. In summer this year the rank and file members of Finsbury Park RMT called for a union conference against immigration control, following a similar event held in Liverpool in March.[12] The proposed agenda contained the germ of a radically different approach. Topics included: 'how do we stop migrants being singled out by employers to produce papers?', and 'defiance not compliance', i.e. organising refusal to participate in reporting on 'illegals', cutting off their benefits and deporting them. 'Non-cooperation' with

immigration control by workers higher in the labour hierarchy created through the same controls will become more crucial than ever as the state moves to devolve responsibility for enforcement onto employers, whose 'legal' employees will in turn be expected to do the dirty work of monitoring and informing. This strategy also contrasts with that of campaigning for 'rights' in that, under the new law, the non-cooperating workers would be entering into illegality themselves rather than trying to use their privileges on behalf of the vulnerable. This could constitute a significant step towards ending the isolation of 'illegals'. It would also help workers prepare to defend themselves against the conditions they face when the 'database state', which union campaigners rightly point out is initially for use in immigration/labour policing, is extended to attack the scraps of freedom and income 'illegally' enjoyed by the wider working class.[13]

Any resemblance between persons living or dead and Unterschreber is entirely deplorable

Footnotes

[1] Strictly speaking, non-EU by citizenship and non-British, French, Italian etc. by ancestry. When the UK first introduced immigration controls in the 1960s, the legislation was framed so as to let in the children and some grandchildren of British settlers in the former colonies, but not the bloody natives. Hence, for example, the colour and class of the majority of self-proclaimed 'escapees' in Britain from 'pariah states' like South Africa in the 1960s-'70s-'80s or Zimbabwe today. These racist provisions substantially remain in place.

[2] The indignation of many Europeans at the 9/11 travel restrictions in the US bespeaks habituation to fast-tracking privileges in the EU, with an ensuing blindness to Europe's 'American-style' processing of everyone else.

[3] 'Non-European' in the sense explained in footnote 1. For the sake of brevity, henceforth simply 'migrants' unless otherwise stated. 'Borders-out-of-control' hysterics, incidentally, might claim in their own defence that they weren't just talking about 'non-Europeans' but about overall numbers. But they almost never call for the French, Germans or British-ancestry New Zealanders to be kicked out, and they rarely even pose the 'problem' as one of EU expansion as such, at least since it actually happened. Rather, they demand that border repression, which under the law as it stands targets non-'Europeans' exclusively and with unprecedented force, be made even more aggressive than it already is.

Once comprehensively defeated on all statistical and material grounds, opponents of immigration eventually whimper about 'social cohesion' being under threat. At this point they reveal more about their 'core beliefs' than they probably intended: 'social cohesion' based on nationality is a racist fantasy, and if it ever existed more concretely anywhere it would need to be destroyed by any means available. See also: <http://www.spiked-online.com/index.php?/behmnr/article/4030/>

[4] Silvia Federici, 'The Debt Crisis, Africa & the New Enclosures', *Midnight Notes* 10, p.15.

[5] See: <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2007/08/377991.html>

[6] See 'They all belong to Glasgow', interview with Ahmed Kahn, *Variant* 25, for an idea of the threat to physical security faced by troublemakers at these sites. <http://www.variant.randomstate.org/25texts/brand25.html>

[7] The phrase 'give yourself up' can rarely have corresponded any more precisely to the actual stakes of surrender. See: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/oxfordshire/6932553.stm>

[8] Emilio Quadrelli, *Evasioni e rivolte*, Milan: Agenzia X, 2007.
<http://www.agenziax.it/?pid=13&sid=30>

[9] See: <http://www.metamute.org/en/Terraces-and-Peripheries>;
<http://www.metamute.org/en/Grassroots-political-militants-Banlieusards-and-politics>;
<http://www.metamute.org/en/French-Banlieues-and-Urban-Guerrillas>

[10] Quadrelli, pages 10-12. The list of incidents ends in November 2005, but CPT riots and mass escapes have continued to be reported regularly in mainstream Italian media, with little attempt to portray the events as unusual or surprising. No comparable shift in detainees' response to detention has been reported in Britain, because prisoner revolt has barely ceased here since the 'facilities' were opened. Group escape during rioting has been less common, though not unknown.

[11] Visa sponsorship is about to return to the UK, thanks once again to the Points-Based System. For more on the implications see: Javier, 'Points-Based Peonage', *Mute* Vol 2 #7, originally published at <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2007/04/369098.html>

[12] See: <http://noborderslondon.blogspot.com/2007/07/union-conference-against-immigration.html>

[13] See the text cited in footnote 11.