

TUC Black workers conference 2008

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I am delighted to have the opportunity today to talk to you about the campaign we are launching, together with the TUC, to win the right to work for asylum seekers.

The current rules in this country mean that thousands of asylum seekers are being denied the right to work. The right to provide for themselves and their families. The right to contribute to society.

This forced unemployment for asylum seekers :

- Destroys communities and individuals who are already traumatised by the events in their home country that have forced them to flee in the first place.
- Reinforces the lazy stereotypes of the Mail and the Sun – that asylum seekers are scroungers who come to the UK to laze about and claim benefits
- Denies the UK the personal and professional skills of asylum seekers

As trades unionists, we know the impact that unemployment has on the lives of individuals, families and communities.

We saw the way that mass unemployment under the Tories in the 1980s destroyed our towns and cities and wrecked the self esteem of a generation.

So, just imagine that impact magnified when people have been tortured, persecuted and forced to flee across the globe in fear of their lives.

The last time I came to the TUC Black workers conference was in the 1990s. The equality agenda – in the UK and the rest of the world- has moved on since then.

We live in a world where women sit in Government across Europe, civil partnerships are celebrated, and a black man may become the next president of the United States.

But one group of people are still discriminated against in the UK – not just through ignorance, but also as matter of active government policy.

Asylum seekers.

People who have come here seeking sanctuary and humanitarian protection.

And yet they cannot work if their claim is refused or delayed.

Yet many people whose claims are refused remain in the UK, in fear of their lives if they return home.

Their claim may have been refused through bad decision-making.

Less than one third of claims are successful.

And almost a quarter of claims that are appealed are upheld. For some countries- like Somalia and Eritrea- initial decision making is so poor that half of all claims are upheld on appeal.

And even when a claim is refused fairly under our rules – someone can still be too frightened to return.

And many asylum seekers cannot return for administrative reasons or because the courts have ruled that their countries are too dangerous.

But its not just refused asylum seekers who are caught in this trap.

Many claims take years to go through the system.

Years during which people are in limbo, unable to put down roots. Unable to work, they become depressed, de skilled and disillusioned.

Bad for them, but also bad for us.

Because it feeds the myth that they are scroungers , are lazy , and come here for benefits.

And sows discord that makes our communities poorer.

And the economy loses out too.

Many asylum seekers are highly skilled.

They are doctors, nurses and teachers.

57% of all asylum seekers are qualified to at least the equivalent of 2 A-C grade A levels meaning that despite the fact that they have come from war zones and countries with limited access to education- they are still better qualified than we are.

As a country, we are denying ourselves the skills of someone like Aisha. A qualified teacher from Ethiopia, with 8 years of primary teaching experience. Since arriving in the UK, she has not been allowed to work. She described this to me as:

“mental torture. I am a mature professional, an independent person, this is emotionally and physically hard “

But not only is this mental torture for Aisha. Many of you are teachers, school governors, or parents. You know that our classrooms are crying out for people like Aisha.

People who as well as being qualified teachers, can act as role models for the children in our schools, showing how people can rise from even the most desperate of circumstances to contribute to society.

All of us in this room are used to fighting hard campaigns.

For causes we believe in, that others think are pie in the sky.

But the right to work for asylum seekers is a cause that commands widespread support.

- 2/3 of the public said asylum seekers should be allowed to work in a poll taken last year.
- Lord Goldsmith- in his citizenship review last month – called on the Government to revisit this issue.
- And the Independent Asylum Commission raised concerns about the continued ban on the right to work.
- The Scottish Government has passed a motion with all party support calling UK asylum seekers to have the right to work whilst seeking asylum

And we are out of step with much of Europe.

In Spain, Italy and the Netherlands, asylum seekers have the right to work after six months.

In 1986, the Thatcher Government gave asylum seekers the right to work.

A right taken away, in 2002, by the Blair Government

A right the Brown Government should bring back.

And to give asylum seekers the right to work would be consistent with the Prime Ministers own beliefs.

In his acceptance speech as Labour leader, Gordon Brown, in speaking of his guiding principals, said:

“And this is what my parents taught me and will never leave me: that each and everyone of us has a talent, each and everyone of us should have the chance to develop their talent, and that each of us should use whatever talents we have to enable people least able to help themselves. ”

That is all asylum seekers are asking for.

The right to use their talents

Contribute to the economy

Provide for their families.

So with the weight of public opinion, political opinion and the rest of Europe on our side, why does the Government continue to deny asylum seekers the right to work?

First- they talk about the “pull factor”.

That it would encourage economic migrants to come to the UK and claim asylum.

As if people come here – from war zones and oppressive regimes - not because they have been raped, beaten or torured, but because they like the look of the job ads in the Times.

Yet studies by both the Home Office and the Department of Work and Pensions confirm there is no “pull factor” for asylum seekers.

Their second reason is that 70% of claims are refused, so there’s no point.

But for the 30% whose claims are successful, the years of enforced idleness, on top of the upheaval and trauma of the events that lead them to leave their home in the first place , mean that by the time they are allowed to work they are deskilled and depressed, and find it hard to get back into the job market.

People like Yeukai, from Zimbabwe.

A young student activist who campaigned against Mugabe.

Who first claimed asylum in the UK 7 years ago.

7 years in which she has not been allowed to work or study, and been placed in detention twice in the UK.

And what really upsets Yeukai is that she is being denied the chance to gain the skills and experience that she needs to help rebuild her country once it is safe to return.

We should be proud to provide a safe home for people like Yeukai who have stood up to tyrants like Mugabe.

But instead we force them to live off minimal benefits, detain them like criminals and deny them the right to work.

In September, we came to the TUC to talk about this campaign at the Race Committees Congress fringe meeting.

Gordon Brown came to that same Congress, and talked about British jobs for British workers.

I am proud that it was our call for asylum seekers to have the right to work that best reflected the mood of British trade unionists.

And that we can go together to the Government so they know that British workers want asylum seekers to have the right to work, once they have been here six months.

Because you have always stood up for the most vulnerable in our society.

That's why the trade unions have campaigned successfully for equal pay and a minimum wage.

You know "an injury to one is an injury to all" - that's why British trade unionists have always been at the forefront of global solidarity campaigns.

I know you will leave this conference and take this message back to your unions, your branches and your workplaces.

That you will sign up for campaign materials, at our stand here today, or via our website or the TUC website.

That you will ask your MP why they won't support the right of asylum seekers to have the right to work.

Because we have so much to gain.

And I will end on the story of Reza, who is a great example of what happens when asylum seekers are allowed to work.

Reza is an Iraqi Kurd, who came here in 1999 seeking asylum. Once he had the right to work, he first of all worked as an interpreter – because he speaks Farsi, Kurdish, Arabic, Turkish and English. He supplemented this with a job in Tesco.

His earnings from these 2 jobs meant he saved enough to go to University. He is in his final year of a degree in Database Design Systems- in his second year exams he got a first.

Reza tells me that being able to work has been important to him, because it has allowed him to study, to socialise and rebuild his life, when destitution has driven others down a different path.

I think its all important to this country, that in rebuilding his life he has given so much back to society.

Asylum seekers are people who are fleeing persecution
They have left their home, their friends and often their family.

They have witnessed dreadful things, and had terrible things done to them.

Often because they have stood up to tyrants in the name of freedom and justice.

All they ask is the right to be treated fairly in the UK.

It's not a lot to ask.

And the Government should be proud to give it.

Together, we can deliver this change in policy that will help asylum seekers rebuild their lives

In dignity, in comfort, and in safety.

Thank you