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Captive labour: asylum seekers, migrants and employment in UK Immigration Removal Centres

Jon Burnett and Fidelis Chebe

Throughout New Labour's period of government there has been a well documented steady rise in the number of people within the immigration and asylum processes being detained. In November 1997, the year that the government came to power, there were 787 people detained, who had claimed asylum, through the use of immigration powers. Ten years later, in December 2007, this number had increased by roughly eighty five per cent to 1455. These figures, however, represent only a snapshot at a given moment in time. They do not include, for example, people held in prison cells or by the prison service. Whilst figures are not available for the number of asylum seekers detained throughout each consecutive year, in the House of Lords it was estimated that, in 1999, approximately 15,000 people were detained under Immigration legislation.¹ In 2004, Amnesty International suggested that 25,000 people who had sought asylum were detained.² According to Bail for Immigration Detainees (BID) slightly less than 30,000 people, not exclusively asylum seekers, a year are detained through the use of immigration powers.³

Many of the people who are detained using immigration powers are those seeking asylum. Ostensibly, asylum seekers are detained for administrative purposes including risks of absconding, and awaiting deportation. At all stages of the asylum process, an individual is liable for detention; and its use has long been condemned by a range of organisations, campaigners, and researchers.⁴ Length of time varies dramatically and

in December 2008 the Home Office stated that 675 people in detention, at that point, as a result of immigration powers had been detained for less than twenty nine days. *Detained Lives*, a report published by the London Detainee Support Group (LDSG) a month later emphasised that there is an increasing use of long term detention of people criminalised through immigration powers. Their research utilised interviews with people whose ‘crimes’ included using fake documents to try and procure employment, and claiming asylum using a different name. On average, they had been detained for two years and the LDSG drew attention to a world of ‘despair and psychological deterioration’.⁵

A consolidating labour industry

That the rising number of asylum and immigration detainees shows no signs of abating is tied to political will. Much like the spiralling use of prison (60,131 when New Labour came to power in May 1997; 82,868 at the beginning of May 2009), the use of detention emphasises decisions consciously made by governments about how to deal with particular social issues. In this context, (and again with parallels to the prison system), New Labour has consolidated trends of contracting out the detention of asylum seekers and migrants to the private sector. There are currently eleven Immigration Removal Centres (IRCs), of which eight are operated and managed by private companies.⁶ And just as policy makers and profiteers have long recognised that the prison population exists as a cheap and highly exploitable workforce; asylum and immigration detainees are beginning to be seen in the same light.

Whilst the exact number of people working within immigration removal facilities is unknown, available information indicates that a particular form of labour market is beginning to take shape. Following the introduction of the Immigration, Asylum and Nationality Act 2006, whereupon IRCs were exempted from paying the minimum wage, at least nine IRCs now have work opportunities available. As a rough picture, the detainee labour industry looks something like the following:

Employment within Immigration Removal Centres	
Immigration Removal Centre	Detainee Employment
Campsfield House <i>(Run by GEO Group Ltd)</i>	Paid work expanded in 2008. There were forty roles, of which thirty seven were filled and of these thirty seven there were at least twelve cleaners, nine kitchen assistants, three gardeners, two litter pickers, one library orderly, one classroom orderly, and one 'buddy'. ⁷
Dover <i>(Run by HM Prison Service)</i>	In 2008 there was an increase in employment arrangements with around ninety employment opportunities. Sixty five people were employed as cleaners, between six and eight people worked in the kitchens, four people worked as painters, and twelve people worked in bicycle workshops. ⁸ Currently, paid work opportunities include: Kitchen assistants, decorating, cycle repair shop, cleaning (wing based), food preparation, orderlies (for example in the gym, or in education), and the 'helping hands scheme' (through, for example, translating). ⁹
Dungavel <i>(Managed by</i>	Current work opportunities include hygiene monitors, grounds officers and servery assistants. ¹⁰

<p><i>G4S on behalf of the UK Border Agency)</i></p>	
<p>Harmondsworth <i>(Managed by Kalyx services on behalf of UK Borger Agency)</i></p>	<p>In 2008 work was available, and at the time of an inspection by HM Inspectorate of Prisons twenty one detainees were employed in roles including orderlies in the gym and residential units, and as ‘friends’ who showed new detainees around and explained the rules of the IRC. Posts removing graffiti and litter picking had not been taken up.¹¹ The IRC planned more job creation for 2009, and there are currently work opportunities available.¹²</p>
<p>Haslar <i>(Operated by The HM Prison Service)</i></p>	<p>In 2007 there were at least twenty eight jobs available in a variety of areas, and between six and eight jobs were due to be added when a bicycle repair shop opened.¹³</p>
<p>Lindholme <i>(Managed by HM Prison Service)</i></p>	<p>In 2008 there were at least twenty two jobs available and roles included working in the kitchen, working in the gardens, cleaning work and one off special projects.¹⁴</p> <p>Currently, paid work is available and jobs include kitchen work, gardening, and cleaning.¹⁵</p>
<p>Oakington</p>	<p>In 2008 there were at least twenty one jobs as education</p>

<p><i>(Managed by G4S on behalf of the UK Border Agency)</i></p>	<p>mentors, residential block orderlies, litter collectors and table cleaners in the canteen.¹⁶</p>
<p>Tinsley House, Gatwick</p>	<p>No paid work (as of March 2008).¹⁷</p>
<p>Yarl's Wood <i>(Managed by Serco)</i></p>	<p>Opportunities are currently available for paid work.¹⁸</p>
<p>Colnbrook</p>	<p>Provision for work expanded in 2008. Jobs included serving food, cleaning, decorating and working on food preparation.¹⁹</p>
<p>Brook House, Gatwick <i>(G4S Group)</i></p>	<p>(Opened March 2009 – information not yet available).</p>

Of course, this picture, as mentioned above, provides only a very broad image. Its information rests on the work of prison inspections and the annual reports of Independent Monitoring Boards which, by necessity, discuss the year previously. Nevertheless, this information does begin to provide an outline of the extent to which detainee labour is utilised, and the work that this industry creates.

The tasks given to immigration and asylum detainees reveal much about the way their presence is seen, by policy makers, within the country. As well as carrying out tasks relating to the upkeep of their incarceration, UK born prisoners are put to work whilst incarcerated, in some cases at least with a desire (no matter how tokenistic) to (re)integrate them within the labour market upon their release. That this stated aim *is* tokenistic is highlighted by abolitionist campaigner Joe Black who notes that education, training, and employment (ETE) outcomes are prioritised below a desire for prison work to ‘ensure dynamic security...’.²⁰ Of roughly 28,600 prisoners working in 2008 at any given time 16,800 were performing administrative tasks relating to the upkeep of the institution, as opposed to 11,800 engaged in workshops. Of this 11,800, forty per cent were on ‘contract services’ ‘producing goods for private sector companies’ in a market worth over £30 million a year.²¹ Profits appear to be prioritised far higher than people.

But if the above indicates a degree of subterfuge, on the part of the prison service about the *raison d’être* of incarceration labour; within IRC’s this deception is not even attempted. The pretence that work is available so as to increase skills or prospects upon release does not exist and where jobs are created they predominantly seek to engage detainees with the upkeep of their own incarceration. There are, it must be

said, exceptions. And Dover IRC for example put people to work last year in a curious system of aid; with detainees building bicycles which were shipped to children in Gambia.²² However in most cases, where work is available, detainees are frequently employed as cleaners, litter pickers, kitchen assistants, decorators, and block orderlies. In this way, a core rationale of detainee labour is to reduce expenditure on essential aspects of the day to day running of the detention estate. IRC's may not yet have opened themselves out to those companies who are so eager to utilise cheap labour, but they have been quick to take advantage of these opportunities themselves. Even if paid the minimum wage, currently standing at £5.73 for adults, £4.77 for those aged between 18-21, and £3.53 for the 'youth rate' between school leaving age and 18, contracted cleaners or kitchen assistants for example would still require wages which outweighed those that detainees can demand.

A super-exploitable workforce

Detained people have historically been utilised as super-exploitable workforce and, as Angela Davis has extensively discussed, imprisoned workers are routinely made available for the use of capital as a result of the discriminatory and coercive work of criminal justice systems. Discussing this trend in the United States at the end of the 20th Century she quoted Michael Lamar Powell, a prisoner in Alabama who stated:

I cannot go on strike, nor can I unionize. I am not covered by workers' compensation of the Fair Labour Standards Act. I agree to work late-night and weekend shifts. I do just what I am told, no matter what it is. I am hired and fired at will, and I am not even paid minimum wage: I earn one dollar a

month. I cannot even voice grievances or complaints, except at the risk of incurring arbitrary discipline of some covert retaliation.²³

The UK may not utilise the prison to the same mass extent as the United States; but as Joe Sim has discussed England and Wales has become ‘the prison capital of Western Europe’²⁴ and certain obvious parallels can nevertheless be drawn. Wages, in a similar way, are compressed to minimal levels and as Joe Back has discussed, the average weekly wage in 2008 of a prisoner was £8: less than what the average child received in pocket money.²⁵ In IRCs, guidance produced at the end 2008 of made clear that detainees should be paid £1 an hour normally, and £1.25 per hour for restricted projects (like, for example, painting a series of rooms).²⁶ Even here though, there are abuses and Corporate Watch has brought attention to migrants being paid 83 pence per hour.²⁷ Such wages are not only low in the context of their real value. Within IRCs, detainees have voiced complaints that the products that can be purchased are priced particularly high. In Dover in 2008, for example, detainees articulated that phone cards, priced at either £3 or £5 were too expensive.²⁸ Such complaints are of particular importance in a context where phone cards can prove a vital lifeline with regard to contacting lawyers, support groups and friends who, in turn, could well mean the difference between being able to build up an anti-deportation case and being forcibly removed from the country.

The disciplinary power of detainee labour

In the context outlined above, the emerging labour industry within IRCs acts as a process that seeks to discipline detainees. That is, labour works to foster certain behaviours and visions of order within the confines of the institution providing these

‘opportunities’. This observation, of course, is not new. Particularly when read in the context of prison labour more generally. In Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, he discussed prison labour as central to an architecture of control. Its function, in part, combined attempts to create a strict and ordered regime with realigning the behaviour of the individual.²⁹ These insights are salient with regard to paid work within IRCs which, as we have seen above, may be important for the detainee in that the financial rewards – no matter how exploitative – can assist in attempts to maintain contact with external support networks. Even where this is not the case, the ‘wages’ received from working provide an opportunity to purchase the most basic of items. Again in Dover, some of the most popular items sold at the shop were pieces of fruit.³⁰ However, with jobs not available for all detainees in IRCs, institutions have created processes through which jobs must be applied for on the one hand, and can be removed on the other. In Colnbrook (CIRC) for example, the Independent Monitoring Board noted last year that:

[P]aid work is only available to detainees who are compliant with the regime in CIRC, the downside is that even the smallest failures by detainees can sometimes result in paid work being taken away. This can often appear to be a disproportionate response from the detainee’s perspective.³¹

Existing as a ‘reward’ for behaviours seen as conducive to the maintenance of order, labour consequently coerces discipline and compliance. As made clear, workers can be fired simply on the basis that they exhibit behaviours which are not seen as correct within the context of the IRC. According to Home Office guidance provision of work should ‘be directly linked to a level of compliance by the detainee on two levels’:

- a. With the centre operator – only detainees who are on the enhanced level of the enhancements scheme may be allowed to engage on paid work.
- b. With the UK Border Agency – only those detainees who are actively co-operating with the Agency in relation to resolution of their immigration case may be allowed to engage in paid work.³²

Examples of ‘non-compliance’ are given as failure to attend interviews, disruptive behaviour in the IRC or whilst the individual is being removed, and a refusal to complete application forms.³³ What such schemes consolidate, in theory at least, are regimes in which detainees are forced into assisting with the maintenance of order. In Campsfield this is made explicit where it is suggested that ‘[d]etainees involved in paid work are more content, and help maintain the Centre at a lower level of tension’.³⁴ However, where this creates order through a system of rewards and punishments for behaviour, the reward that is on offer is highly exploitative labour. The benefits for the IRC only emphasise the cruelty of an immigration and asylum system which seeks quite unequivocally to carry on locking up more and more people in the immigration and asylum process. According to the *Campaign to Close Campsfield* labour is ‘forced in the sense that [detainees] are locked up for 24 hours a day, uncertain of their future and with no money to purchase any essentials they may need’.³⁵ Yet, at the same, detainees must acquiesce to practices which seek to effect their own removal in order to get the opportunity to work. IRCs – prisons in all but name – save costs on their maintenance by taking full advantage of legislation which invites them to exploit their inmates. Whilst simultaneously, they create conditions

where detainees are reliant on this exploitation for financial ‘opportunities’. Oakington IRC, paying its detainees in vouchers redeemable as cash within its confines, makes this exploitative economy cyclical by ensuring that all profits ultimately go back into the account of G4S, the company who manages it.³⁶

Conclusion

The human misery which the UK detention estate embodies can not be overstated. In the first six months of 2008 incidences of self-harm rose by seventy three per cent³⁷ and there have been numerous cases of detainees ending their own lives whilst incarcerated.³⁸ According to allegations made by the Chief Inspector of Prisons Anne Owers, at Lindholme IRC staff in 2007 were issued with staves – banned in low security prisons – in order to enforce discipline.³⁹ It is in this framework that an emerging labour market must be placed. Work is envisioned, at least in part, in order to foster order. Yet the evidence of numerous investigations suggests that this ‘order’ is also maintained by the use, or threat, of physical force.

There is fundamental and obvious irony in that people who are prohibited from working as a result of their immigration status can be put in conditions where they have to accept exploitative working practices if detained. This is embedded further if considering the fact that whilst on the one hand the government is massively increasing resources and manpower to investigate and prevent undocumented working; on the other it is sanctioning conditions that have many of the hallmarks of undocumented working in IRCs. It is not uncommon for undocumented workers to be paid similar wages to the £1.25 per hour maximum rate recommended by the Home

Office for detainees. And many of the coercive elements inherent within undocumented working – the ability to fire workers at will, the lack of mechanisms of redress, the precarity of workers’ immigration status⁴⁰ - are apparent with regard to detainee labour.

Ultimately, these conditions must be understood in a wider context of exploitation. An emerging labour industry within the UK’s detention estate provides profit for those who have taken advantage of a growing market for locking up asylum seekers and other migrants. It is necessary that such practices, in their entirety, are recognised to be exactly what they are. For as Angela Davis has discussed:

Once the aura of magic is stripped away from the imprisonment solution... what is revealed is racism, class bias and the parasitic seduction of capitalist profit within a system that materially and morally impoverishes its inhabitants...⁴¹

Exploitative working conditions are only one part of the core that is revealed when this magic is stripped away. In this way, the struggle against the exploitation of people whilst they are detained must be connected more widely to the struggle against a detention estate which locks up increasing numbers of people who are criminalised, demonised, and victimised.

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