

The Misery Makers

Solidarity Federation

Summer 1999

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As soon as the bombing started back in April, the trickle of people fleeing Kosova became a flood. As usual, NATO got it really wrong, and Blair, Clinton and their hundreds of clever advisers failed to see the obvious coming. Now, there is a chance to start sorting out the thousands of split, broken and suffering families.

NATO hasn't even dared contemplate the scale of the devastation, killing and economic and social damage it has wrought across Serbia and Kosova. And Milosovic, well, does he care? The main thing is, both he and Nato knew that he wasn't going to be on the streets when the bombs rained down.

The real victims, as in every war, are ordinary working class people like you and me. Factory workers, public service workers, teachers and nurses, childcarers, mothers, fathers, shop assistants and the self-employed, all have been press-ganged, bombed, terrorised, deprived of basic dignity, services, rights, and even life. Where you live and what your language and culture is within Kosova and Serbia is only likely to have influenced the type of suffering and who exactly is inflicting it on you.

If hundreds of thousands of displaced Kosovars are to be repatriated before winter, there is much to be done — and Britain and the US will speedily throw resources into it. Not, you understand, because they have the best interests of the people at heart, but because the alternative is unpleasant TV reports and more pressure to accept more refugees onto home soil.

Indeed, Home Secretary Jack Straw has asked the Refugee Council to co-ordinate provision of temporary accommodation and interpreters. The Home Office is also conducting a trawl of disused army camps and other government accommodation that could be brought into use. But the British (and New Labour) record on refugees is less than generous.

what Labour really thinks of Kosovars

Before the Nato bombing, local and national media were running sensationalist stories which branded asylum seekers — Kosovars included — as benefit scroungers and criminals. There is tacit support and even active encouragement from New Labour — the government has been feeding a steady stream of case material to the likes of the Daily Mail to satisfy its lust for racist reporting. The crux of the matter is that, like all racists, they have started to believe that Britain is both attractive and comfortable to asylum seekers, yet it will be overwhelmed if we let them in. Well, surely if it was about to be 'overwhelmed', it wouldn't be so 'attractive'? This is, of course, one area where the capitalist mindset suddenly backtracks on its notions of free market and freedom of movement. And I thought the free market assumed total freedom of labour markets and movement (and indeed, even zero transport costs, at its most efficient). And I thought Britain and the US were pro-free market? Oh, only on *some things, not foreigners or poor people maybe.*

Now, after Kosova, far from challenging the prejudice and race-hate whipped up by the press, government proposals in the current Immigration and Asylum Bill threaten to add to the misery.

the new asylum

The Bill contains provisions to strengthen pre-entry controls, making it harder for people fleeing terror and persecution to enter the UK. Airlines that carry refugees without visas are already subject to fines, which will be extended to drivers of lorries that are found to contain refugees.

The Bill makes it a criminal offence for asylum seekers to use false documents — yet many genuine refugees are unable to obtain passports and visas before escaping. It also cuts further the support system for asylum seekers who do gain entry. Currently, only refugees who claim asylum at the port of entry are entitled to benefits, while those who claim once inside the country have to contend with a largely cashless system of support administered by local authorities under the Children Act 1989 and the National Assistance Act 1948. In the Bill, Local authorities will no longer have responsibility for asylum seekers (apart from for unaccompanied children). Instead, a new Home Office body will co-ordinate accommodation and cashless support, dispersing asylum seekers to “reception zones”. Refugees will have no choice about where they are sent and they will get far less than Income Support.

So, New Labour’s latest plan amounts to this; *refugees will find themselves split up and in a corner of the country where they stick out like a sore thumb, and there is no existing community they can relate to; they will have no money, only humiliating and complex vouchers; and local agencies and authorities will have inadequately skilled and resourced means of assisting them with basics like trauma counselling, English language skills, etc.*

what else could they do?

The Balkan crisis has exposed the sharp contrast between the New Labour Government’s commitment to war and bombing on one hand, and its hard line on refugees in general on the other. Given this, the Asylum and Immigration Bill is just what you might expect from New Labour. Now, the common challenge from Blair is what else can you do with a tyrant like Milosovic. Well, he is a product of the capitalist system of domination and hierarchy which Blair and his ilk are constantly reinforcing throughout, and constantly fine-tuning to screw the poor harder. In other words, let’s ditch capitalism for a fairer system and we won’t have any more Milosovics. But even under capitalism, we could have helped defend Kosovars by directly attacking the perpetrator of the crimes against them, instead of unleashing war on innocent Serbs. Why fly 3 miles high and spray towns and cities with depleted uranium warheads and cluster bombs which will kill and maim for generations to come? Why drop bombs around people, if you don’t want to hurt them?

If you want to overcome nationalism, racism and ethnic cleansing, you first have to practice what you preach and believe in what you want. Setting an example, educating against bigotry, empowering communities, depowering leaders; all these things can be done quickly and effectively, decisively and successfully — without the innocent bystanders being slaughtered. But would you expect Blair or Clinton to connect with that, given their particular hobbies?

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