Solidarity with refugees

TUC statement

September 2016

Calais refugee camp

The nine thousand people currently trapped in the Calais refugee camp are facing the threat of the imminent demolition of their temporary homes and facilities – often paid for by donations from working people in Britain.

The TUC – working with organisations like Care4Calais and our sister unions in France – opposes demolitions, because of the humanitarian cost and the failure of previous attempts to address the issue with similar approaches. In February, half of the camp was demolished - driving some to even worse camps along the coast – but the camp is now bigger than before because refugees continue to arrive.

Meanwhile the residents in the camp continue living lives put on hold, exposing vulnerable people including children to terrifying risks, and now local residents and workers like truck drivers face escalating violence from people smugglers exploiting the situation.

A longer term, sustainable solution is needed, providing justice and security for everyone concerned.

In the meantime, the TUC is working with Care4Calais to ensure union members understand what is happening, and encouraging them and their unions to:

* Sign the [online petition](https://www.change.org/p/unite-with-refugees-sign-the-petition) to Home Secretary Amber Rudd opposing the demolition; and
* [Donate](http://care4calais.org/donate/) money and badly needed goods through the Care4Calais website.

You can find out more at the [www.care4calais](http://www.care4calais) website, but here is a brief summary of the issues, starting with a case study demonstrating the human impact of demolitions:

*"Abdo" age 26 left Sudan shortly after the militia arrived at his village. He said they razed everything to the ground. "Even the trees were on fire."  Everyone just ran and in the confusion he was separated from his family who he hasn't seen since.*

*In February when the French police demolished his small shelter in the southern zone of the jungle it brought back these painful memories. Once again there was nothing he could do to stop the destruction of the tiny bit of normality that was his life. Once again he was subject to violence and fear.*

*After they had gone we had nowhere for him to sleep so I led him to the mosque. I offered him some food and a blanket. He sat on the floor and turned away the food I had brought for him. He said "I don't care any more." Not even enough to eat.*

*I never want to see a grown man that despondent again. He had given up all hope.  This is just one reason why demolishing their homes is such a cruel thing to do to a refugee.  They are here because they lost their homes once.  Don’t let it happen again.*

Brief overview of Care4Calais

Care4Calais was founded in November 2015 and is run entirely by volunteers.  We are the main provider of non-food aid in the Calais refugee camp and we also send aid to refugees in Paris and in various other smaller camps in Northern France.

We have four key areas of operation:

* Direct aid: providing basic living essentials including clothes, food, bedding, tents, and toiletries.  We run a building program that constructed the Sudanese community home, the social centre, the dental building, re-roofed the calais kitchen, fixed water points and maintains the schools and has repaired and waterproofed hundreds of shelters and tents in the camp.
* Social care: mobile English, French and art workshops, sports days and music events.
* Emergency response: reacting to fire and evictions, providing emergency supplies and helping people move and rebuild.
* Campaigning in the UK to encourage the public to be more welcoming towards refugees.

We have 15 part-time UK-based volunteers and between 20 to 60 volunteers on the ground in Calais on any one day and are a UK registered charity number 1169048.

Although we are mainly Calais-focused we see our mission as encouraging the UK public to be more welcoming towards all refugees (not just those in Calais). That said, Calais is often a focus for the UK refugee debate due to its physical location and the controversy this causes.

Background to the demolition of the camp and why we do not believe this is an effective solution

Over the summer we have seen a rapid increase in numbers living in the Calais refugee camp, currently estimated at around 9,000 people.  There have also been Incidents of increasingly violent tactics being employed by people smugglers on the roads entering the Calais port, disrupting important transport links. Local residents, politicians and hauliers from both sides of the Channel are making loud calls for their respective governments to take action to resolve the position, and something needs to be done.

In response the French Interior Minister, Bernard Cazeneuve, has said that the camp will be completely dismantled as soon as possible.  The French authorities are creating up to 12,000 places in the CAO centres around France for people to be moved to.

However in February this year over 50% of the camp was demolished and yet six months later the camp is bigger than it has ever been before. This is clear evidence that demolitions do not act as a deterrent and that refugees will not stop coming to Calais.  Destroying their homes will achieve nothing more than making living conditions so much more inhumane.

In the six months since the February demolitions we have seen an increase in people living in the smaller camps along the northern coast and in northern France.  If the Calais camp is closed to new arrivals then it is likely that these camps will grow.  While the Calais camp is far from ideal these smaller camps have no running water at all, now showers, toilets or medical facilities and are much more difficult for aid organisations to access with basic aid.  Destroying the thousands of pounds worth of basic infrastructure that is present in Calais, due to the donations of UK and other volunteers, is tragic and purposeless.

Work has also started on a wall costing around £2m between the Calais camp and the motorway, in a bid to reduce the smugglers’ access to transport links.  It is strange that, while plans are being put in place for demolitions in October, £2m is being spent on a wall.  This suggests an acknowledgement by the French authorities that the demolitions will achieve nothing and that the refugees will continue coming to Calais.  This makes wanton destruction of the existing camp facilities even more tragic.

The escalation of problems in Calais, and the fact that we know that more, not fewer, refugees are on their way, means that a longer term solution than demolitions is required.  It is very clear that something needs to be done, and we call on the French and UK governments to talk to us about a sustainable, long term solution that will help the refugees, the hauliers and the Calais townspeople.  Demolitions are not the answer.