

Bring Down the Bars and #ShutDownYarlsWood. Notorious U.K. Detention Centre

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Nestled in the heart of a seemingly innocuous business park in the hinterlands of Milton Earnest is a bleak, squat building contained within walls of taut barbed wire. This is Yarl’s Wood, the notorious detention centre where asylum seekers are detained indefinitely without trial, before being deported. People can get lost in its labyrinthine bowels for years, stuck on the punishing treadmill of our vast immigration bureaucracy. In recent years, reports of dehumanizing conditions within Yarl’s Wood have led to a gradual awareness amongst the public that the world inside its walls is a terrifying place, where a culture of impunity leads to gross abuses of power. What is to be done?

Certainly there is a powerful argument that the facility shouldn’t exist at all.

It has a nefarious reputation for a reason. Access to basic, vital rights to personal and social protection is denied to detainees, particularly harming those from vulnerable backgrounds. During a fire in 2007, officers complied with orders to lock detainees in the burning building, injuring five people and risking their lives. In another disturbing instance of heinous neglect, during a wildcat hunger strike by women at least 70 of them were locked in an airless corridor without water or toilet facilities by way of punishment for their dissent.

Moreover, there are numerous corroborated allegations that staff have sexually assaulted detainees, and in 2011 the High Court ruled that children were being kept in unlawful conditions. All of this raises questions about who is being entrusted with running this facility. If all they are good for is abusing inmates, it raises the question of whether Yarl’s Wood serves a public function at all. It is, in fact, very damaging, and embarrassing for a country with pretensions to being civilized.



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A large part of the problem with Yarls Wood is the fact that it is privately owned and thus isn't subject to measures of accountability, oversight and scrutiny which are the modus operandi for publically owned organisations. The reputation of the center has decreased noticeably during the period when Serco have been in charge. The corporation entrusted with running Yarls Wood has demonstrated severe deficiencies in their behaviour time and again, but they glide from scandal to scandal with near total impunity, rewarded for their ineptitude with eye-watering profits. Privatization of detention facilities has created a machine in which the relentless creation of profit triumphs over the duty of doing a good public service. Prisoners aren't treated as people. In the eyes of the administrators the bottom line matters more than quality of life. That's how prisoners end up sick, dead and abused.

Equally as disturbing as the frequency of abuse is the complicity of the government in letting Serco off the hook. The Home Office have refused Freedom of Information requests demanding statistics on the number of people sexually assaulted, on the grounds that it would jeopardise commercial interests. They have done everything in their power to shroud Yarls Wood in secrecy, rather than using their influence to force daylight on to the nefarious practices inside.

They are complacent in the face of abuse, and have made no efforts to stop it. At a time when even the conservative Australian government is agreeing to close a controversial detention center on the grounds that it is unconstitutional, it is perhaps surprising that Britain is not seriously considering the same future for Yarls Wood. Yet with the rise of xenophobia, politicians will choose to cynically scapegoat asylum seekers for the problems they created and try to turn us against each other, rather than against the real danger to our society: Yarls Wood itself.

In a climate where there is no political will to hold Serco to account, the bold and rancorous Movement For Justice By Any Means Necessary have called upon allies in the resistance against Yarls Wood to protest against the facility and its inhumane conditions once again. The movement campaigns against detention and deportation by the Home Office, working

very closely with the detainees themselves in a grassroots campaign that has grown from strength to strength in recent years. Their tactics usually involve surrounding the building with a braying crowd of allies. It is firstly a way of reminding detainees they have noisy support on the outside. Secondly, it is supposed to remind the oppressors of the fragility of their perimeters. The gates and the guards and the barbed wire can easily be overwhelmed by enough people. The message proclaimed is that our society, with a positive regard for the lives of asylum seekers, is bigger than yours. People have the power.

It is a flaw in our thinking that we have a tendency to see problems as existing in the past, but never in the present. History remembers Ellis Island for violating its detainees. Similar experiences of oppression still burble under the face of our society, under the illusion of its progress, but politicians would sweep the truth under the rug in order to service the myth that we have become a more tolerant and open-minded society. The Movement For Justice By Any Means Necessary tries to break lethal inaction and silence with direct action, stirring up a cauldron of opposition which has shocked and frightened the detention services.

A fundamental and momentous question about public services and their purpose consists in the debate about the future of Yarl's Wood: does it serve the needs of business, or the wider society? Do we even get a say? If there is no space for public consultation on its future, is democracy a ruse?

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