



Annual Report 2022-2023

This report is being written soon after hundreds of people lost their lives when their boat sank in the Mediterranean Sea on June 14th 2023. We don't yet know exactly how many people died that day or even many of their names. They were trying to reach Europe to claim their right to asylum, safe from war, persecution and poverty.

They are not the first to lose their lives on the borders of Fortress Europe and sadly they will not be the last. They are victims of a UK/EU immigration policy which relies on the threat of drownings, vigilante attacks and the deliberate creation of a “hostile environment” as deterrence. We dedicate this report to them and to their grieving families and friends.

Over the last year SYMAAG has been more active than ever in combating this hostile environment alongside people seeking asylum and our many allies. This report doesn't cover everything we've done but provides examples of our work written by a wide variety of our members. It's heartening to see many new members, from around the world, join us in struggling for humanity and justice, motivated by love and solidarity.



Dignity Not Detention in Durham *by Victor Mujakachi*

On the 18th of March 2023 SYMAAG and its members made a trip to

Hassockfield/Derwentside Immigration Removal Centre. The planning of the trip was made by SYMAAG's anti-detention group to show solidarity with the women locked up in Hassockfield which is a women's detention centre near Durham. A coach with a capacity of 50 people was hired (with the support of Sheffield Trades Union Council) to ferry supporters from Sheffield who comprised SYMAAG, members from The Jubilee Movement, Anti-Raids, These Walls Must Fall, Sheffield Left and VVIDY (Voice for Voiceless Immigration Detainees Yorkshire) a new campaign group based in Sheffield of people who in the past have been put in immigration removal institutions.



Derwentside/Hassockfield IRC in March. Photo credit: Manuchehr

There was a carnival atmosphere on arrival punctuated by speeches and expressions of solidarity with the women in detention as the Sheffield group met up with protesters from places such as Newcastle. The day culminated with a march right into the premises of the detention centre to hand over Mothers Day cards to the women inside and let them know we were here supporting them. The march into the detention centre complex was a bold and daring act of solidarity that took the prison officers by surprise and at some point in time it appeared as if arrests of the protesters would be made. Thankfully, cooler heads prevailed when a petition was handed over to the security personnel at the detention centre after which the protesters marched back to their meeting point.

When the time was up, the jubilant group of protesters boarded the coach back to Sheffield with the satisfaction that they had expressed their democratic right of showing solidarity with marginalised women whose human rights were being curtailed by being incarcerated in immigration detention due to an accident of birth.

Women Life Freedom by *Manuchehr Maleki*

The murder of Jina Mahsa Amini in the Tehran police department, started a fire which swept away the ashes of 44 years of corruption, embezzlement and dictatorship. The funeral ceremony of Jina in Kurdistan was the beginning of the slogan of the "Woman-Life-Freedom".

A fire that ignited more than 110 cities and 140 universities in Iran. A fire was started in which women and young girls were the flag bearers for the first time in the world. Women were in front of all the protests.

During these demonstrations, more than 700 people were killed and nearly 800 people were blinded by shootings and beatings.

According to the Iranian judiciary, more than 100,000 people were arrested and subjected to severe torture in illegal detention centers. Yet, the protests for women's rights, national rights of Kurds and Baluch's and workers' rights continue and grow.



Demonstration of support for Women Life Freedom protesters in Iran outside Sheffield Town Hall. Photo credit: Manucheher

These issues prompted us to speak out about the violation of human rights in Iran. SYMAAG worked with Iranian and Kurdish community organisations to organise a big solidarity event outside Sheffield Town Hall on October 9th. We joined women's rights organisations, political party representatives, trade unionists and human rights activists to declare Sheffield's solidarity with the Women Life Freedom Movement. We have supported many other local solidarity protests and helped bring the demands of Iranian and Kurdish protesters for women's rights and national rights to the attention of local media and Sheffield MPs.

We have pointed out the hypocrisy of the continued diplomatic engagement between UK, European and US Governments with the Iranian regime while it continues its repression, causing Iranian people to become refugees. The Women Life Freedom protesters are praised by the same western governments who condemn Iranian and Kurdish refugees as 'illegal immigrants' when they try to reach safety from persecution in European countries. This double game encourages the Iranian regime to intensify levels of repression, further increasing the numbers of Iranian and Kurdish protesters forced to risk their lives again seeking safety in European countries.

SYMAAG works to support people forced to become refugees but also to show solidarity with movements for justice in their countries of origin. We seek to increase

understanding of why people are forced to migrate and to show our solidarity with them. This is what Solidarity Knows No Borders means to us. This is why we will continue to work for Women Life Freedom in Iran and around the world and maintain our solidarity with the Iranian uprising.

Working Alongside Refugees in Sheffield *by Emma Rattenbury*

Last Autumn, SYMAAG established a new forum, with Sheffield City Councillors from across the political parties and refugee and asylum seeker support and campaigning organisations in and around Sheffield. It was agreed to call this Working Alongside Refugees.

Since it began, the group has met six times, and is currently supported by SYMAAG, with a mailing list of over 40 contacts including 12 councillors.

The group is in the process of firming up its Terms of Reference, and has two key purposes:

- To support and inform Sheffield City Council to use their powers and influence to make the city's status as a City of Sanctuary a lived reality for migrants and asylum seekers coming here.
- To provide a forum for networking and information exchange between local organisations in this field and Sheffield City Council.

Since its formation, the group has:

- Organised a cross party visit by Councillors to local asylum housing venues, i.e. the Holiday Inn in Sheffield and Jasmine Court. SYMAAG provided briefing information for the elected members going on this visit and set up an opportunity for them to speak to residents at the weekly Drop In before the visits took place.
- Put together a motion for presentation to the full Council for discussion. Based on this, and due to bureaucratic blockages to the presentation of a cross party motion, SYMAAG drew up a petition which has received almost 500 signatures in an effort to stimulate a debate.
- A motion is finally going to full Council from the Green Party, with support from Labour, on Wednesday July 5th, together with SYMAAG's petition. Both call on the Council to appoint a Migrant Champion to lead on this work in future.

In addition, the following issues have been identified for future work:

- To improve the provision of Health Needs Assessment and access to health services, especially mental health.
- To push for investment in expanded legal support for those seeking asylum.

Trade Union Support for Refugee Rights *by San Senik*

Solidarity is the bedrock of trade unions. By their very nature, trade unions show solidarity with all oppressed people both nationally and internationally; they don't simply look after industrial relations, defending workers' jobs and terms and conditions. Trade unions stand shoulder to shoulder with everyone that has experienced exploitation and suffered maltreatment.

ASLEF (the main train drivers' union) has shown constant solidarity with refugees and will continue to reject their scapegoating.



Picket at Sheffield station. SYMAAG returning the solidarity shown to us by ASLEF trade union. Photo credit: Manuchehr

At our recent Annual Assembly of Delegates (AAD), the union adopted a motion to oppose the Rwanda project. The motion was accepted unanimously. We also unanimously voted to adopt a motion to oppose use of immigration detention centres. During the AAD, we held a fringe meeting at which we discussed the UK asylum system with representatives from Asylum Justice. ASLEF also supported the defense of people seeking asylum housed in a Rotherham hotel when they were attacked by far right protesters.

The union's BAME representatives Committee, of which I am the chair, took a motion on the exploitation of Kurdish and Turkish migrant workers to Black Workers TUC. The motion called on the TUC to not ignore the issues of migrant workers and to work with the community to overcome their experiences. Our motion was adopted with a unanimous vote. I was also elected on to the TUC Race Relations Committee where I will continue to raise the profile of all migrant workers, people seeking asylum and refugees.

Supporting Refugees in Rotherham *by Eloise Ward*

On Saturday the 18th February 2023, SYMAAG supported a counter-demonstration in Rotherham. After hearing of far-right action being planned outside of a local hotel, members of SYMAAG were among the many individuals and organisations determined

to show their solidarity with those housed there. Stuck in unsuitable accommodation and facing harassment from racists and fascists, people seeking asylum are exposed to unacceptable threats and degradations in the Rotherham hotel. But on that day, the counter-demonstration of roughly 400 far outnumbered the far-right protest.



Message from one of the people housed at the Rotherham hotel attacked by the far right. Photo: These Walls Must Fall

Messages of comradeship were exchanged, through signs and hand gestures, between those stood outside the hotel and those held within. An atmosphere of robust and uncompromising support emerged, vivid in its contrast to the violence that had unfolded in Merseyside only a week earlier.

SYMAAG stands in direct opposition to hate and harassment, and will continue to act in solidarity with those who face it.

Yorkshire Solidarity Summit *by Melinda Mo Martinez*

On 15th April, after several conversations during the past few months about the possibility of working together for system change, some organisations involved in the migrant and refugee sector, including SYMAAG, and our allies came together to organise the Yorkshire Solidarity Summit. More than 65 organisations, faith and community groups from all over Yorkshire attended the event.



Yorkshire Solidarity Summit, April in Sheffield. Photo credit: Migrants Organise

This event aimed to build on the excellent ongoing work of community organisers across Yorkshire to ensure we are aggregating our power, working together to tackle the numerous challenges facing refugees and migrants and effectively bringing about the most needed changes.

The day was about imagining a different world from our current one. Organising together is one of the most effective ways to create this world. Some of the key messages included the fact that we have the power to bring about change, but we need to build and make good use of it. The fight for change is a long-term one.

This hostile environment is trying to divide us. For this reason, we must challenge that, not just by doing the actual work of changing the system but by coming together and living what it truly means to be in community together and, in solidarity, with each other. It will give us the energy and the joy to keep going and do our work.

Asylum Seekers' Right to Work - Lift the Ban *by Melinda Mo Martinez*

After the Yorkshire Solidarity Summit, we had the conviction and commitment that now, more than ever, we must work together.

This is the reason why several organisations, including SYMAAG, faith and community groups, universities, businesses, and people with lived experience, have created a coalition to push the Lift the Ban campaign in Sheffield and a joint effort with the national campaign to fight for the right of asylum seekers to work.

Positive steps have already been taken, for instance, having an event organised at City of Sanctuary promoting the campaign, the support of new businesses in Sheffield, the support of trade unions and the proposition from the Green Party to pass a motion in the council to reaffirm Sheffield as a City of Sanctuary, including in the motion the right to work for asylum seekers.

Banning people from work is one of the deterrent measures the government is using to stop people seeking sanctuary from coming to the UK and invite those already here to leave. People seeking sanctuary are stuck in the asylum system for many years, sometimes even 20 years, without the right to work.

The consequences of banning people from work are disastrous. The impact on their mental health, wasting talents, worsening the problem of human trafficking and modern slavery.

We must understand that this is not only about money. It is about integration, dignity and purpose in their lives.

For this reason, this coalition wants to clarify that we are seeing what this hostile environment is doing to many people's lives and that we will not keep quiet about what is happening because we know that we are stronger together. The power is for the people.

Abolish Reporting Campaign *by David Price*

Many people seeking asylum have to report regularly at Vulcan House, the Home Office's building in Sheffield. This can be very stressful as people are fearful that they may be held and detained when visiting Vulcan House. Nationally, Migrants Organise and These Walls Must Fall launched the Abolish Reporting Campaign which SYMAAG has supported. This campaign has had some success, particularly in the Home Office's introduction of telephone reporting for some asylum seekers in 2022.

SYMAAG is working with Migrants Organise to plan a national conference in London to review the Campaign and plan its future development. We believe that local campaigns to Abolish Reporting and tackle the growing Home Office surveillance culture need to meet and organise at a national level.



Outside Vulcan House Home Office Reporting Centre in February showing our support for one of our Zimbabwean members who had been threatened with detention and deportation when he went to 'report' there.

The campaign to Abolish Reporting has also led SYMAAG into an unusual dialogue with a senior officer in the Home Office. In June 2021, we demonstrated about reporting outside Vulcan House and submitted a letter addressed to the officer in charge. To our surprise, a Home Office Inspector who was in charge of reporting at Vulcan House agreed to meet us. We have now had two meetings with him. We agreed about the need to improve Home Office culture, following Wendy Williams' Report on the Windrush scandal. At our meeting in April, he agreed to look into the cases of two members of our team whose claims had been long delayed. We pressed for greater use of telephone reporting, (currently only used in 12% of cases at Vulcan House). He welcomed this and wants more asylum seekers to apply to switch to telephone reporting. However, he would not revert to the previous arrangement under which volunteers who accompany asylum seekers were allowed inside Vulcan House. A special case now has to be made and accepted.

We have yet to witness – as a result of this dialogue - any improvements in how people are treated when they are forced to report at Vulcan House but we remain open to future discussions. In the meantime we will continue to demonstrate outside Vulcan House Reporting Centre for the rights of people seeking asylum, as we have a number of times this year.

Talks For Change *by Stuart Crosthwaite*

SYMAAG's Talks For Change are a series of events designed to discuss migration-related issues in depth, to educate ourselves and others on the causes of forced migration.

Our last Talk For Change was in December in Sheffield where we welcomed Liz Fekete, Director of the Institute of Race Relations (IRR), as our main speaker on the 50th anniversary of the founding of IRR. IRR describes itself as “at the cutting edge of the research and analysis that informs the struggle for racial justice in Britain, Europe and internationally”. Liz recalled A. Sivanandan's (a founder member of IRR)’s memorable comment that “we are here because you were there” referencing the link between colonialism and migration.

We discussed issues of practical solidarity with asylum tenants and how to support the Women Life Freedom movement in Iran and Kurdistan. We also looked at how climate change, debt in the global south and migration justice are linked and the need for anti-racist, climate justice and workers movements to work together.

More SYMAAG Talks for Change are planned for 2023-24 with a range of national and international speakers. If you have an idea for an event, work with us to make it happen!

Sharing the work: SYMAAG Membership, Organisation and Media *by Stuart Crosthwaite*

There have been big changes in the active membership of SYMAAG since the last report. Some members have gained their right to remain after long battles and – understandably – want to catch up on those missing years waiting for the Home Office to recognise their rightful claims to asylum. We wish them well. Some older members have wanted to reduce their activist work as health issues and caring responsibilities increase. A number of younger members have moved away from Sheffield.

But we've also had an influx of new members, drawn to us by the severity of the hostile environment policy and SYMAAG's campaigning reputation. Many come from other campaigns – climate justice, LGBT+ activism, women’s rights, other asylum rights organisations or students. Some from the trade union movement or as ex-members of the Labour Party. Others are currently in the asylum system and bring their courage and expertise as political activists from their countries of origin. We welcome them all and the changes they bring to SYMAAG.

Sharing organisational responsibilities like secretarial work and chairing helps to encourage and train new members. We have a Secretarial Team, currently Stuart, Nadia and Val (thanks to Jodi and Otto for their work) and the role of Chairperson has been shared between Manuchehr, Emma and San. We hope that the role of Treasurer can also be shared.

In response to new members' questions about SYMAAG history and how we operate, Jodi, Stuart and Pious created a new members information pack. We now have a SYMAAG flyer to distribute in person, advertising our aims and inviting new members.

Jodi helped to improve the SYMAAG website with the addition of more resources. It has been successful as a means for donations to be made to SYMAAG (over £2000 in 3 years) but still functions more as an archive of our work than an organising tool. Thanks as always to Sam Musarika for his work as website admin.

Our social media presence has increased with very active Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts and a SYMAAG You Tube channel with admin responsibilities shared between Manuchehr and Stuart. Thanks also to Manuchehr for his role as SYMAAG photographer and video film-maker.

We continue to receive many requests from local and national media to comment on migration-related stories, particularly asylum housing. We aim to share the role of spokesperson between as many of members as possible, supporting and training people where necessary.

Take action – join SYMAAG

We are all volunteers and we welcome new members.

Join our mailing list by emailing us at dignitynotdetention@yahoo.co.uk

Donate to SYMAAG via our website.

Come to our organising meetings - usually on the first Tuesday of each month in Sheffield centre.

Why I joined SYMAAG, some quotes from new members

"I am a Kurdish woman who was exiled for being a Kurd, forced to leave my home town and am now in exile, forced to establish a new life with my husband. SYMAAG is the first place that respected me as a woman, because of my Kurdish nationality and values. It helps me to fulfill my human rights"- member who wishes to remain anonymous

"I joined SYMAAG because they are a community that I can learn from. There's a diverse range of skills and experiences being wrangled towards a common, and essential, cause. I'm glad to be part of it and to contribute to its work" - Eloise

"It became apparent to me following the more recent hostile narrative from the main political parties in relation to migrants & refugees that helping out in any way possible with SYMAAG was where I wanted to spend my time and energy. SYMAAG has for years stood for respect and dignity for refugees and migrants and under the current climate they need more people to take a stand and support the important work they do in our region. I'm honoured to be part of the secretarial team for SYMAAG" – Nadia

"Because I want to be part of changing the toxic and divisive narrative about migrants

and asylum seekers" - Lisa

"I joined SYMAAG a year ago because I've always been impressed by their campaigns and the direct involvement of those with lived experience. Great to be part of this inclusive action focused organisation" - Emma

"I'm so proud of you all in SYMAAG, and I feel so grateful for having you as my comrades to fight together for system change" – Melinda