

Migration, Political Engagement and the State: A case study of immigrants and communists in 1930s South Tyneside in the UK

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Introduction

According to the International Definition of Social Work, social work encompasses a range of forms of action striving for social justice. This chapter addresses one moment in the history of grassroots social action, in which alliances were formed around an internationalist notion of citizenship to challenge the exclusion of particular groups on the basis of definitions of citizenship that were racist and imperialist. Such exclusions continue today, and valuable lessons can be learned for contemporary social work.

Marx ([1852] 1943: 23) said:

‘Men make their own history, but not just as they please. They...have to work upon circumstances as they find them, to fashion the material handed down by the past.’

People are born into a particular location within international capitalism, from which they relate to conflicts within that system. Migrants’ experiences are influenced by the material relationship between their country of origin and their new country of residence. Historical development – of individuals and the world – is determined both by the conflicts arising from material relations, and by:

‘the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic - in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out’ ([Marx \[1859\] 1971](#): 21)

Different conceptions of what citizenship means center on terms for inclusion and exclusion that reflect contradictory class positions. Longstanding international inequalities in ownership of capital and consequently, wealth and power (Kundnani 2007; Kyriakides and Virdee 2003), can be understood as properties of capitalism in its imperialist phase (Lenin [1916] 1975; Yaffe 2006). In this context, the ruling classes of countries occupying imperialist positions have frequently promoted forms of citizenship that protect their privileges by excluding people from countries occupying an oppressed position, except insofar as their labour is needed. These are consequently racist (Vickers 2012). As part of resistance to oppression and exploitation, political movements have developed alternative, anti-racist, notions of citizenship that are based on international solidarity between working-class people. This chapter explores these themes through a case study of one such struggle.

Case studies are useful in responding to this variation in citizenship across times and places, because they explore the fine detail of social processes within a particular context (Esterhuizen, 2004: 22). This chapter explores a case study of the so-called ‘Arab riot’ of 1930 in South Shields, North East England. This involved struggles by migrants from Yemen (an oppressed country) and their allies, against exclusionary citizenship practices within Britain (an imperialist country). The case study was inspired by documents in the Tyne and Wear Archives, including witness statements, court proceedings, and campaign materials. The case study triangulated data from these primary sources, an exhibition that presented videos of Yemeni seamen’s narratives about their history in South Shields ([Gharavi 2008](#)), and research by Byrne (1977) and Lawless (1995). A Marxist theoretical framework (Vickers [2012](#)) explored the interaction of social, political and economic processes within the case study as part of a ‘real aggregate’ system of elements mutually interacting over a sustained period (Bukharin, 1969: 84-7). The discussion alternates between description of the case study and theoretical reflections on exclusionary and inclusive forms of citizenship. The chapter concludes by considering what lessons this case study can offer for contemporary social work practice.

Case study: The Arabs of South Tyneside

A local court, ‘Durham Assizes’, held hearings for Arab seamen accused of ‘rioting’ in South Shields in 1930 (Criminal Investigation Department, 1930). The struggles surrounding this illustrate the conditional citizenship offered to immigrants to Britain from less powerful countries, and their potential to resist exclusion through alliances based on internationalist notions of citizenship.

Arab settlement in Tyneside

Records of visits to South Shields by Arab seamen go back to 1770 ([The Journal 1994](#): 14). Britain occupied the Yemeni Port of Aden in 1839, under the pretext of a British-protected vessel that ran aground in 1837. Aden served as a coaling station between Bombay and Suez, and was administered by the British authorities in Bombay until 1937 when it became a Crown Colony. The British occupiers expanded the port, attracting economic migrants from Somalia, India, and Yemen’s highlands ([Lawless 1995](#): 29-32). Competition from France and Germany prompted Britain to establish Protectorate Treaties with tribal leaders in Aden’s hinterland from 1888-1903, securing British control ([ibid.](#): 33-7). Britain’s relationship to Yemen at this time was as colonial occupier.

Historically, liberal notions of citizenship based on the nation state developed as an integral part of capitalism, and were sharpened by the development of capitalism into its imperialist form, which involved an international division of labour between relatively privileged imperialist countries where ownership of capital was concentrated, and oppressed countries that yielded super-profits (Lenin [1916] 1975). This represents a contradiction within liberalism, whereby

relative comfort and democracy is afforded to sections of the working class in imperialist countries, buying ‘social peace’ at the expense of intense exploitation and repression in oppressed countries (Clough 1992). As the colonial politician and businessman, Cecil Rhodes, put it in 1895:

‘I was in the East End of London... yesterday and attended a meeting of the unemployed. I listened to the wild speeches, which were just a cry for ‘bread! bread!’... I pondered over the scene and I became more than ever convinced of the importance of imperialism... in order to save the 40,000,000 inhabitants of the United Kingdom from a bloody civil war, we colonial statesmen must acquire new lands... The Empire, as I have always said, is a bread and butter question.’ (cited in Lenin [1916] 1975).

The exploitation of colonial labour was an essential part of imperialism in its earlier stages, and continues through neo-colonial relationships. From the 1850s, Arabs were employed on ships at Aden, as ‘firemen’ - shovelling coal into furnaces below decks; onboard ‘tramp steamers’, where employment was hard, insecure, and shunned by many British seamen ([Lawless 1995](#): 16-20). Arab settlement in South Shields began in the 1860s ([Byrne 1977](#): 262). As British subjects, residents of Aden and the Protectorate were entitled to live and work in Britain, but people joined ships at Aden from a wider area. This was used to place the citizenship of Arab migrants under suspicion, as those originating in other parts of Yemen were ‘foreigners’ and, during the First World War, ‘enemy aliens’ if they came from areas controlled by the Ottoman Empire ([Lawless 1995](#): 23-8). This lack of security represented an exclusionary dimension to Arabs’ citizenship, despite formal equality. Employment of Arab seamen living in South Shields increased during the First World War to replace British merchant seamen drawn into the armed forces; 700 Arabs lost their lives as a result ([ibid.](#): 11-15). The presence of Arab seamen in South Shields was contingent on labour demand that could not be satisfied using white British seamen, either because it was unpleasant work that they refused to do or because the state needed them elsewhere (to fight state wars). Some Yemeni seamen married British women and set up boarding houses together, connecting with other parts of society and providing support to other Yemeni seamen in times of unemployment ([ibid.](#): 47-60). This represents grassroots inclusion to compensate for state-imposed exclusion.

Rules to exclude during a recession

The numbers of Arab seamen in South Shields peaked in the early twentieth century at 3000-4000 residents and fifty Yemeni boarding houses ([Gharavi 2008](#)). Following the First World War, economic depression and the demobilisation of British soldiers and sailors increased tensions between white and Arab seamen (Lawless, [1995](#): 77-81). The government passed exclusionary legislation including the Aliens Order 1920:

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‘which permitted the issuing of a deportation order for any alien who was certified...to have “within three months from the time at which proceedings for the certificate are commenced been in receipt of parochial relief or been found wandering without visible means of sustenance”’ ([Byrne, 1977](#): 264).

Any migrant who placed demands on the state for support was liable to deportation, demonstrating the close historical relationship between welfare provision by the (capitalist) British state and exclusionary forms of citizenship (Craig 2007). This was followed by the Special Restriction (Coloured) Alien Seamen’s Order 1925, imposing ‘an obligation to register with the police upon all coloured seamen’. This applied regardless of whether they were British citizens ([Lawless 1995](#): 106), and further reinforced the insecurity of Arab seamen’s citizenship.

The National Union of Seamen (NUS) played a significant role in the events of 1930. Byrne (1977: 265) describes the NUS as ‘effectively a company union for the British Shipping Federation’ from the mid 1920s to the 1930s, formed from the amalgamation of the Sailors’ and Firemen’s, and Cooks and Stewards, unions. The ‘PC5’ system enabled the unions and the employers to exercise joint control of labour, by requiring a card to be signed by the Shipping Federation and the union, initially the Sailors’ and Firemen’s and later the NUS, before any seaman could get work ([Lawless 1995](#): 121-2). The NUS’s high fees excluded many seamen from official membership, and union officials on salaries substantially above seamen’s wages dominated meetings, using older members who were dependent on the union for pensions to carry votes. Yet, all Arab seamen in South Tyneside in the 1920s were paid-up members of the union, and some of its most enthusiastic supporters ([Byrne 1977](#): 265-6), demonstrating their commitment to organising on a class basis, across national divides.

Against this, the NUS’s attempts to play on the divide between Arab and white seamen were central to their strategy of controlling all seamen. The NUS sent deputations to the Board of Trade in December 1929 and April 1930 complaining about the employment of Arabs as firemen amidst high unemployment. The union’s normal defence, when accused of racism, was that they had no problem with Arab seamen in general, but only with ‘Arab aliens’ smuggled into the country by boarding house masters. Repeated statements by the union warning against the ‘social menace’ of ‘half-caste, illegitimate children’ suggests a ‘much wider, racist assault’ ([Lawless 1995](#): 113-20), and exposes the nationalist, exclusionary alliance between the state, employers, and sections of working class organisations.

Inclusion through solidarity

Divisions between workers from different countries are contradicted by pressures rooted in the fundamental processes of imperialist capitalism, that call for workers to cross borders as part of an international reserve army of labour ([Castells \[1975\] 2002](#); [Chinweizu and Jameson 2008](#)). Diverse intrusions of the global into the local follow, as international movements of capital and

labour drive international movements of ideas and cultures (Dominelli 2000), and working class people are brought into contact with one another across national boundaries and presented with opportunities to form alliances. In 1930, a new 'rota system' required Arabs to re-register with the NUS each time they finished work on one ship, before they could sign for work on another (Lawless 1995: 127-8). Although the NUS claimed the rota would help 'legitimate' Arabs find work, registration required Yemeni and Somali seamen to produce evidence of either British nationality or employment on British ships when the 1925 Coloured Seamen Order was passed (Byrne 1977: 270). Communists saw this as a divisive tactic in preparation for major lay-offs (Daily Worker 1930). A mass meeting of Arab seamen, the week after the rota was announced, passed a resolution rejecting it on the basis of cross-national working-class unity, arguing the rota 'was likely to cause ill-feeling between white and coloured men' and would set up Arab seamen as strike-breakers (Lawless 1995: 127-8). Some took a different course, and Arab seamen who chose to register for the rota received the backing of the Western Islamic Association, who wrote to the Secretary of State for India expressing their support for the rota (ibid.: 132), consistent with its history of 'always urg[ing] support for the Government at a time of economic depression and unemployment' (ibid.: 133), showing the potential for citizenship to be contested by different forces.

Prior to the rota, the Communist-led seamen's section of the National Minority Movement had been active in South Shields. The Minority Movement called for a new union to fight the PC5 system, raise wages, shorten working hours and improve working conditions, and made explicit the principle of 'unity and solidarity to all seafarers no matter what their colour, creed or nationality' (ibid.: 124). Over the course of its first meetings in South Shields, the Movement recruited 300 members (ibid.: 123-4). As soon as the rota was announced, the Minority Movement began to organise against it. At the end of July, the Communist Party's Tyneside District Party Committee issued a manifesto pointing to the police escorts for seamen registering for the rota and by association the role of the Labour government in enforcing the rota against workers in Britain, at the same time as it attacked Arabs with gunboats in Egypt and aircraft in Palestine. The manifesto argued that this showed the 'essential unity of the workers of all lands against their common enemy, the capitalists' (ibid.: 135-6). By making a sustained grassroots intervention, Communists and their allies used contradictions within imperialist capitalism to build an alternative notion of citizenship that was anti-racist, anti-imperialist and rooted in working class solidarity across racialised divides, to challenge racist and parochial notions of citizenship, which fetishise the capitalist state through the idea of a 'national interest'.

The campaign against the rota included regular pickets at the 'Mill Dam', outside the offices of the NUS and the Board of Trade, where the 'riot' of 2 August took place (ibid.: 131-2). The Arab crews of two ships, the *Linkmoor* and *Etthelfredd*, were reportedly paid-off and when attempts were made to re-engage them, they refused to get a PC5 or register for the rota. The ships then attempted to recruit white crews (Byrne 1977: 272). A confrontation between the pickets and two white seamen ensued, followed by police baton-charging and arresting picket. Police statements

reveal they were ‘expecting trouble’ but did nothing to prevent or disperse the meeting, which might imply they were looking for a pretext to arrest leaders and in particular to deport Ali Said, a boarding house master and prominent leader of the movement against the rota ([Lawless 1995](#): 137-52).

Although significant numbers of white seamen supported the picket on 2 August, the court heard that the police targeted Arab seamen. Accounts are contested, and a limited range of documents survive from the trial. The Prosecution stated that two white men were violently attacked by the pickets simply for attempting to register for work, but the Minority Movement accused the two men of being ‘agent provocateurs’ who attacked the picket with weapons to force them to defend themselves and create a pretext for police intervention. One officer initially said he had removed a weapon from one of the two, but he later asked to remove this from his statement. Despite these men’s centrality to the trial, the Prosecution chose not to call them as witnesses (*ibid.*: 137-52), enforcing the idea that they worked with the police to provoke violence. When sentencing the convicted, the judge recommended that all but two of the Arabs should be deported following their sentence, citing high levels of unemployment that made ‘these men dangerous in idleness’ ([Durham Assizes, 1930](#)). This exposes the threat that the state perceived in the internationalist alliances promoted by the Minority Movement, and their recourse to immigration controls in response. Big solidarity meetings followed in North Shields ([Daily Worker, 1930](#): 1), which had never had significant Arab settlement (Byrne 1977: 262) and therefore demonstrated wider non-Arab support for those arrested.

Legacies of exclusion and resistance

Exclusionary practices did not end with the trial. Arrests of speakers at seamen’s meetings and the national organiser of the Minority Movement followed ([Daily Worker, 1930](#): 1). On 29 September, 100 Arab seamen presented themselves at the Poor Law Institution at Harton, the local ‘workhouse’, to apply for indoor relief, having been refused outdoor relief as ‘aliens’. A racist campaign in the press ensued and 38 of the 100 men were deported in January 1931. Others left the workhouse and either signed for the rota, or if they were unregistered under the 1925 Act, left Britain, faced with the impossibility of obtaining legal work or state support ([Lawless 1995](#): 161-7).

The rota enabled the adoption of a more exclusionary form of citizenship, beyond what the state could achieve by itself. A Home Office minute dated 3 October 1930 states:

‘The rota system was a private invention, brought off by the collaboration of the Seamen’s Union and the employers in certain ports. No Government Department could have managed it with existing powers, but it looks like being a success’ (cited in [Lawless 1995](#): 73)

Further exclusionary restrictions followed the collapse of resistance. The 1935 British Shipping (Assistance) Act made subsidies to merchant shipping contingent on the employment of British crews. This measure was included under pressure from the NUS and TGWU unions, demonstrating that trade unions may serve a range of purposes and interests, with the potential to either unite workers on the basis of international working class solidarity, or to reinforce exclusion of workers from oppressed countries in order to protect the relative privileges enjoyed by some workers in imperialist countries. Restrictions were imposed on the issuing of documents for travel from Aden to Britain, which were only eased in 1939 with the prospect of renewed war and a consequent increase in demand for labour ([Lawless 1995](#): 153-73).

The struggle against the rota left a legacy of inclusionary practices. Although the Minority Movement lost its immediate demands for the abolition of the rota and the PC5, it continued to be active, fighting a 'guerrilla campaign' for free speech through the autumn of 1930 and helping to diffuse a confrontation between white and Arab seamen in July 1931. Communists in South Shields continued to fight discrimination against Arab seamen, which Byrne (1977: 274-6) suggests helped lay the basis for effectively opposing the British Union of Fascists later in the 1930s.

Conclusions for social work practice and policy

In the case study above, attempts by people from less wealthy and economically developed countries to build a life in Britain conflicted with the British government's priorities. Yemeni seamen were welcome only as long as their labour was needed; the citizenship afforded them was insecure. As soon as capitalism entered a crisis, they were rejected and targeted, first with unemployment, and when they resisted, with imprisonment and deportation. This represents multiple forms of exclusion, which viewed at a collective level are racist because they targeted people based on their perceived membership of a racialised national group. These experiences can be explained through Britain's imperialist position within the capitalist system (Yaffe 2006), which results in the British state adopting a concept of citizenship that excludes 'them' from oppressed countries from 'our' wealth in imperialist countries ([Kundnani 2007](#): 3-4). Where such stark contradictions exist between migrants and the British state, attempts by social workers to remain 'neutral' mean being complicit with the oppressive status quo. Siding with groups oppressed by the state leaves social workers vulnerable and calls for alliances, for example with other workers in the same workplace or trade union, or service user or political organizations in the community. Lessons in how this might be done can be drawn from histories of radical social work (e.g. Reisch and Andrews, 2001), and from cross-national alliances such as the case study above.

This case study also shows migrant populations' different responses to their situation, with a divergence between self-organisation in partnership with the state, which helped to perpetuate exclusion, (the Western Islamic Association), and movements of resistance against the state

through class-based inclusion (the movement against the rota). Arab seamen compensated for their exclusion by engaging in inclusive grassroots level strategies, by joining trade unions and setting up boarding houses with British women. These longer-term inclusionary practices provided a basis for more overt resistance to the rota, when combined with alliances with a Communist-led movement that organised around an internationalist concept of citizenship. This underlines the need for social workers and others to develop counter-discourses to support and inform challenges to exclusionary citizenship practices.

The tendencies highlighted by this case study have continuing relevance today. Since the 1960s, Immigration Acts have increasingly restricted migration to Britain, particularly from less wealthy and economically developed countries. This has left asylum as one of the only legal routes for many people to move to Britain. The right to asylum on a universalist basis represents an implicit threat to the government's preferred bases for settlement, conditional on either personal wealth or labour market demand (Vickers 2012). Since 1999, the government has increasingly responded by threatening refugees with deportations, imprisonment, prohibition of paid work, and exclusion from many welfare services (Sales 2002), alongside a 'points based system' for economic migration that represents a fine-tuning to the needs of British capital (Chinweizu and Jameson 2008). This demonstrates persistent tendencies in Britain toward forms of citizenship that are subordinated to the needs of British capital and frequently exclusionary; and the continuing need for grassroots movements that struggle for alternative conceptions of citizenship based on working class internationalism. Social work can contribute to such movements by building alliances, advocating for resources and offering organisational training and education about the connections between global and local issues. In doing so, in many cases they will be forced to choose a side.

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