**The Permanent People’s Tribunal: Hostile Environment on Trial – the working conditions of migrants and refugees**

**Detainee labour in Immigration Removal Centres (IRCs)**

This evidence concerns the use of detainees as a distinct labour force in the UK’s immigration detention estate. It expands upon previous research conducted by the authors into detainee labour, published in the journal *Race & Class.*[[1]](#footnote-1) It also utilises interviews with people who have worked in the UK’s immigration detention estate conducted for the purpose of this evidence. All IRCs have, or have had, paid employment opportunities for immigration detainees. Wages are generally £1 per hour for a range of roles including working as kitchen and servery workers, orderlies, laundry workers, painters, cleaners, ‘greeters’ (to help induct new detainees), and carers for detainees with disabilities. In some scenarios, this can increase to £1.25 per hour. This labour is not contracted-out to external companies (as is the case for some of the work in prisons, for example). Rather, it is used to contribute to the upkeep of the institutions themselves. The extent to which these workforces are integral to the running of IRCs should not be under-estimated. In an inspection of Brook House IRC published in 2017, for example, there were just under 400 detainees at the time of the inspection, and just over 100 paid work opportunities available. Potentially up to around a quarter of those detained in this institution would therefore be employed by it at any given time.[[2]](#footnote-2) Against this backdrop, detainees constitute an integral labour force within the institutions themselves; and as a labour force they serve at least two inter-related functions that we wish to draw attention to here:

First, they reduce running costs within the specific institutions themselves. Most IRCs in the UK are managed by private companies, and using detainees to contribute to cleaning, cooking, painting and so on within them reduces expenditure on their upkeep and day-to-day operation. With the minimum wage currently set at £7.83 for those aged 25 and over, the wage that detainees can command will in some cases be significantly lower than that which would otherwise be paid externally. It has been reported elsewhere that in 2016-17, 887,973 hours of work were carried out by detainees across the detention estate, for which £887,565 was paid in wages. Second, detainee labour serves as a function of internal social control, forcing compliance and acquiescence to IRC regimes and broader Home Office rationales. In some IRCs, paid employment is only available for those with ‘enhanced status’, which is often awarded as result of ‘good’ (i.e. compliant behaviour). Given that the meagre wages on offer may be necessary for a range of reasons, sub-waged labour is thus utilised to coerce acquiescence to regimes in immigration detention which can be violent, abusive and significantly harmful. One former detainee stated: ‘In detention centres, exploitation and racism walk side by side. You are abused and you have to earn the right to be exploited (work) for £3.00 per day. If you fail to comply, your ‘privileges’ (TV, radio etc) are withdrawn.’ Another person stated: ‘I worked as a cleaner for £4.00 per day. When I did extra hours having been promised extra pay, we were never paid. When we insisted, we were locked up for three days and threatened with denial of [any more] work.’ As such, these ‘privileges’ must be understood in a context where the consequences of detention are frequently profoundly damaging. One person stated 'what I experienced in detention has never left me, I will never be the same again, my sense of self worth in every sense is non-existent'.

Ultimately, the UK’s immigration detention estate should be abolished, and we believe that all short-term reforms must be set against the backdrop of this aim. Until this is achieved, all detainees working should receive a salary consummate with the UK’s living wage and work must be de-coupled from any sense of privileges. These ‘privileges’ should be available regardless of whether the detainee works or not. All work must be subjected to rigorous oversight by external health and safety regulatory bodies.

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1. ####  Burnett, J. and Chebe, F. ‘Captive labour: asylum seekers, migrants and employment in UK immigration removal centres’, *Race & Class,* (Vol. 51, No. 4, 2010), pp. 95-103.

 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. HMIP, *Report of an unannounced inspection of Brook House Immigration Removal Centre, 31 Ocober-11 November 2016,* London: HMIP. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)