

Protest and Resistance in Detention Centres

JoAnn MCGREGOR (2010). "Contestations and consequences of deportability: hunger strikes and the political agency of non-citizens." Citizenship Studies 15(5): 597 - 612.

JoAnn McGregor here explores the resistance and the “the desperation, distress and division” (608) animating a hunger strike amongst Zimbabweans in a UK detention centre in summer, 2005. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 21 ex-detainees who had been confined in removal centres for between 6 weeks and 2 years in various episodes over the period 2001–2009, McGregor spoke with 8 people detained during the strike itself. While it was a serious hunger strike, the intention was not a mass suicide but relief from deportation: “ ‘We were clear in our heads’, one participant recalled, ‘this was not about killing ourselves, it was a protest against being removed . . . ’ ” (603) The strikers were sometimes reluctant participants, sometimes only superficially going through the motions. (604) All interviewees spoke about the stigma of being treated like a criminal, both by the state and by their families and friends who assumed they had mishandled their own cases. (606) They also had mixed attitudes towards British authorities with some people blaming the state and others trying to understand why they have been subjected to detention. (607)

To understand the protest and protestors, McGregor argues for a nuanced framing that could incorporate, but is not coextensive of, both Agamben’s biopolitical state of exception and the medicalised vocabularies on the effects of detention. (599) Instead, she argues for an accounting of religious beliefs and a politicized diaspora in fueling detainee protests, particularly in the case of Zimbabweans. (600 - 601) Indeed, the success of the strike “depended on detainees’ links to a strongly politicised, highly educated and well-connected diaspora.” (608) McGregor is careful to link the actions within the detention centre, as well as the post-release experiences of the strikers, to the broader consequences of experiencing insecure immigration status and the UK’s turn to detention and deportation.

Further reading:

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- Freedman, J. (2009). "Mobilising against detention and deportation: Collective actions against the detention and deportation of ‘failed’ asylum seekers in France." French Politics 07(03/04): 342 - 358.
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- Nyers, P. (2008). "In solitary, in solidarity: Detainees, hostages and contesting the anti-policy of detention." European Journal of Cultural Studies **11**(3): 333 - 349.
- Peutz, N. (2007). "Outlaws: deportees, desire and 'the law'." International Migration **45**(03): 182 - 191.
- Silverman, S.J. (2008). "Redrawing the Lines of Control: What Political Action Undertaken by Refugees in Border Detention Centres Tell Us About International Politics". Abstract for Dead/lines Conference. Oxford.
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- Tyler, I. (2013). "Naked protest: the maternal politics of citizenship and revolt." Citizenship Studies **17**(02): 211 - 226.