



NJPN Comment

Crisis of refugees – or of attitude?

Barbara Kentish



Calais' current migrant issues are an illustration of the bigger challenges of welcome facing Greece and Italy. Many in Calais have passed through southern Europe, their fingerprints fed into the pan-Europe database.

While there remains a need for a coherent humanitarian policy at European level, local hospitality initiatives are inspiring. Volunteers in northern France are going the extra mile to welcome migrants into their homes. People such as V, who renovated her outhouse to equip it with water and electricity, to host two migrants; and P, who rents a disused presbytery to house five more. This winter, in disused parish rooms, he welcomed a further 11, while the Catholic Worker House is currently home to 16 others.

Citizens are allowed to offer hospitality. France's well-known 'crime of solidarity', forbidding help to those without papers, has been attenuated by a judge who ruled that the primary value of *'Fraternité'* trumps that of excluding non-citizens from human rights. It is an interpretation often challenged on the ground, however, and helpers must beware of profiting from any *quid pro quo* services.

Despite this climate of deterrence, the welcome of NGOs in the Calais region has operated brilliantly until the Covid-19 crisis. Utopia56, Refugee Community Kitchen, Project Play and Woman's Aid, Collective Aid and Secours Catholique have now dovetailed efficiently to provide a range of hospitality services.

One scheme deserving mention is *Migr'action59*, a family hosting project in Lille. It offers weekend respite stays to migrants, taking them away from the life of struggle, providing meals, a clean bed, showers and clothes washing.

Another drop in the ocean? Sophie Djigo, a philosophy lecturer and founder of *Migr'action59*, claims not: rather, such actions can break down barriers between migrant 'outsiders', and 'citizen' society. Eating, socialising and sleeping in the same house are steps towards recognising equality between human beings, regardless of their circumstances. *Migr'action* has found that the 48-hour break allows the 'exilés' to take stock and rediscover a little hope in humanity, after their multi-country rejection. A few reconsider their plans to reach the UK, seeing other possibilities, including asylum in France.

These French citizens are re-asserting their instinct to offer hospitality to others, resisting the apparently state-sanctioned violence towards the scapegoats for European problems.

We don't find these beacons of hope much in the papers. After all, they may be crimes of solidarity!

Barbara Kentish is a member of Westminster Justice and Peace.