
AdvocacyNet
News Bulletin 181
December 19, 2008

DALE FARM TRAVELLERS FACE RACISM AND PREJUDICE AS COURT MULLS APPEAL

Basildon, UK: Traveller families at the Dale Farm site in southeast England have faced an outpouring of racism and prejudice as they await a decision from Britain's Court of Appeals on whether local authorities can evict them from their homes.

Earlier this month, the Travellers were rebuffed by the local community association after they applied to join in an effort to build closer ties with other area residents. A letter from the association's chairperson, Tina Borer, said that their membership would not lead to greater community cohesion.

After the [story](#) appeared in the local newspaper, the Echo, the paper's website received a torrent of [hateful comments](#) referring to the Travellers as "dirty thieving law breaking scumbags," "outlaws," and "tax dodgers."

The Travellers have sent a complaint to the British Press Complaints Commission about the Echo comments, according to Grattan Puxon, Secretary of the Dale Farm Housing Association. The Advocacy Project (AP) also contacted the Echo, and some of the most offensive comments were removed. But many still remain, and their message is unmistakably hostile.

"This story and the racist comments which followed require some action to uphold Travellers' rights," Mr Puxon said. "There is a lot more racism, as ever, in these comments and the Echo newspapers need to be held responsible."

The Travellers have been defined a distinct ethnic group by British law and have long been targets of discrimination in the UK. The controversy marks the latest twist in a [long-running attempt](#) by the Basildon District Council to expel around 90 families from the Dale Farm site. Although the Travellers own the land, the Council has denied them permission to build, on the grounds that the site is within the Green Belt and protected by environmental regulations.

The Council has also refused to make other land available to Travellers, as it is required to do. Councillors from the opposition Labour Party vigorously oppose the eviction plan, as it would produce extraordinary suffering, shift the burden to other local councils, and pull Traveller children out of school.

The eviction orders were [halted in May](#) by Judge Andrew Collins of the British High Court, but the Council appealed the ruling. Another hearing was held December 4, and Traveller families expect a decision from the Court of Appeals early next year.

AP has supported the Travellers since June 2005, when they were first ordered out. AP sent two Peace Fellows to work at Dale Farm, and this week pledged \$500 to help support internet connections and heating at Dale Farm's community center.

The recent rejection by the Residents' Association, and the exchange with the Echo newspaper, has deepened the sense of isolation at Dale Farm. The Echo has a large audience in the Basildon area, and Dale Farm residents feel it often portrays Travellers in a negative light. The paper ran several articles on AP's 2007 Peace Fellow, [Zachary Scott](#), which provoked scores of critical comments.

The latest comments follow a series of inflammatory articles in British national media, including a front page headline in the Daily Express reading "Families must sell land for Gypsy campsites," and the launch of an anti-Traveller "Stamp on the Camps" campaign in the Sun newspaper. Similar articles have also appeared in the Daily Mail and the Evening Standard, according to Richard Sheridan, President of the Dale Farm Housing Association.

The Dale Farm Travellers protested outside the London offices of the Press Complaints Commission on December 5, and the Commission has now agreed to meet with a delegation. In preparation, the Travellers are asking supporters to e-mail them letters of complaint about discriminatory articles, which will then be presented to the Commission.

Alerted by AP, the Global Affairs Club at Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations has taken up the issue of Dale Farm, and will be sending letters. Others interested are encouraged to contact Dale Farm directly, or through AP.

- Read the [Echo article and comments](#)
- [Send a letter](#) to the Press Complaints Commission
- Learn more about [Dale Farm Housing Association](#)