

International Romani Day

The First World Romani Congress

8th April 1971, forty-eight years ago, the First World Romani Congress was held on the outskirts of London, in Orpington, Kent. Organised by members of the **Gypsy Council** and the **Comité International Rom**, the meeting and its associated open-air music festival on Hampstead Heath, would mark a high point in the history of Romani and Traveller people. The delegates to this congress represented Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities from across Europe. Romani and Traveller women actively participated, some of the first Romani people to gain Ph.D. degrees in academia were present, Travellers from France (*Gitane* and *Gens de Voyage*) from some of the evangelical churches that had been growing since the end of the 1940's attended, together with artists, musicians, resistance-fighters and broadcasters. It was an event that was marked by the adoption of a political programme for emancipation and equality, mobilised through Romani and Traveller organisations, in addition to a unifying flag (blue, green and the red wheel) and anthem (the song, '*Gelem, Gelem*').

The iconic photograph of the event is actually from a demonstration against forced evictions of Traveller people and the subsequent death of three children, in their caravans, in Walsall, near Birmingham. A show of solidarity and support from the newly established World Romani Congress, for the plight of Romani and Traveller communities in the U.K. facing increasingly draconian laws about 'stopping places' or 'halting sites' as Travellers call them. As legal, temporary encampments became more and more restricted, whilst local and national governments dragged their feet in providing permanent dwelling sites for Gypsies and Travellers, such evictions would only increase, with the consequent destruction of caravans and property by bailiffs contracted by local councils. This process of confrontations culminated in the legislation of 1994, the Criminal Justice and Social Order Act, arguably criminalising Gypsy and Traveller mobility and movement. Since then, the scale of destructive evictions has only increased, with the huge eviction, after a long and bitter legal battle, of the Dale Farm community in October 2011 being an especially harsh low-point.

In the uncertainty of the times ahead, Romani and Traveller communities face greater pressures on lifestyle, movement, culture and even continued existence, than ever before. The existing initiatives and programmes from Europe, such as the National Roma Integration Strategies, will disappear and are unlikely to be replaced by national and regional governments in the U.K. Support drawn from European policy will also evaporate, as will the possibility of protections for minority ethnic communities in general and Romani and Travellers in particular, that stem from EU legislation. The only conventions that will remain, such as the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, will be those that derive from the U.K.'s Council of Europe membership and it remains to be seen how these protections and the appeals process to the European Court of Human Rights, will operate in a U.K. divorced from Europe. Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities will need to regroup, reorganise and rebuild the kind of unity in diversity, both in the U.K. and with European *Roma*, *Sinti*, *Manouche*, *Gitano*, *Ashkali*, *Resande*, *Balkan Egyptian* and *Romanlar* and other communities, that was so much a feature of the First World Romani Congress in 1971...

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