

Australia:

Immigrant workers tied up with rope

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23 February 1999

Refugees and workers from Asia were tied up with rope and others handcuffed when Australian immigration officials aided by state police detained 44 farm labourers--33 men and 11 women--at two tomato farms in Victoria's Goulburn Valley last Thursday. At least 19 of the tomato pickers were tied up, and the whole group was kept waiting for hours in blazing heat without food or water while being interrogated.

Frances Prescott, a fellow picker, told reporters that one man was not allowed to drink from his water bottle, another was told to urinate in front of other people and that Asian workers were screamed at because they could not speak English. The workers were accused of having overstayed their visas or working in breach of visa conditions. Some are understood to be refugee applicants awaiting the outcome of appeals against deportation.

The treatment of the immigrant workers only became known when the farmer who had employed them photographed the workers roped together in a group and informed the media. The farmer, Joe Vraca, said the workers were degraded and demeaned. "They were tied up like cattle and rounded up in a circle. It was disgusting," he told the press. "Not even a dog gets tied up any more. I thought in Australia we didn't do things like that."

Searches continued on into the night, netting another seven workers--five men and two women--who were found hiding in a nearby caravan park where the pickers lived. The workers are mainly from Vietnam and Indonesia, with several from Malaysia, Israel, China, Korea and Samoa. Three of the workers were given 28 days to leave Australia for overstaying visas and the rest were detained at Maribyrnong Immigration Detention Centre in Melbourne, facing deportation.

The following day immigration officials detained

another 19 fruitpickers at Stanthorpe, south west of Brisbane, in Queensland. They included workers from South Korea, Israel, Malaysia, Fiji and Britain.

Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock defended the use of ropes to restrain the workers in the Victorian raid, saying there were not enough handcuffs and that this was a good start to the year's work. These latest operations are part of a stepped-up crackdown by the Howard government against "unlawful non-citizens"--anyone without a valid visa.

Last month, immigration raids resulted in 977 detentions, a 16 percent increase on January 1998. One of the biggest January raids involved the detention of 18 people near Moree, in outback New South Wales, when immigration officers and state police intercepted buses taking workers to farms in the area. In February to date 389 people have been detained.

In 1997-98, 12,925 immigrant workers were rounded up, a 12 percent increase on the previous year. The 1998-99 total is already over 7,500. The number of raids increased by 24 percent from 2,725 in 1996-97 to 3,381 in 1997-98.

Such raids have been carried out for over a decade, having been initiated by the former Hawke and Keating Labor governments. The Labor Party's immigration spokesman Con Sciacca immediately defended the latest raids. He was soon joined by Labor's employment spokesman Martin Ferguson, a leading member of the "Left" faction and former president of the Australian Council of Trade Unions. Ferguson said the Department of Immigration should "investigate the bona fides" of employers during the raids.

Australian Workers Union secretary Bill Shorten, whose union covers rural workers, endorsed these comments. Shorten called for immigration officials to carry out repeat raids and for the growers' tax and

superannuation records to be checked. These remarks are in the tradition of the "White Australia" policy that was championed by the Labor Party and trade union leadership from the 1890s to the 1960s. Under the guise of protecting Australian workers against exploitation, the Labor and union leaders continue to support racist discrimination.

Several factors have combined to lead fruit growers to turn to immigrant labour to pick their crops. In the first place, the work in the orchards and farms is backbreaking, seasonal and so poorly paid at piece rates that only professional pickers can scrape a living. Harsher restrictions on welfare payments also mean that unemployed workers who work on the farms can lose their benefits for months, even if the work lasts only weeks.

The resulting labour shortage has prompted some sections of the Howard government's Liberal Party-National Party coalition to criticise the Immigration Department crackdown and call for changes to visa restrictions to allow short-term guest workers to be hired at harvest time. The Victorian state agricultural minister Pat McNamara called for overseas workers to be recruited on temporary visas for fruit picking.

Another factor is that last year the Howard government introduced new restrictions on asylum seekers who have appeals before the courts, severely limiting their right to work. Already ineligible for welfare assistance, many refugees are unable to provide for themselves and their families. They literally have to work illegally or starve.

Sylvia Winton, the co-ordinator of Sydney's Asylum Seekers Centre, commented: "The horror is that people have no way to survive without working because asylum seekers are not eligible for any benefits at all."



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