

Australia: Racism and the 47 Afghan asylum seekers

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The arrival of a boatload of 47 Afghan asylum seekers, five of whom tragically died in an explosion last week off Australia's northern coast, has triggered an hysterical national security and anti-refugee campaign by politicians and the media. Anyone looking in from outside would be forgiven for believing that the country was under imminent threat of invasion from a huge influx of aliens, intent on seizing scarce resources and undermining the "Australian way of life".

Within hours of the boat explosion on April 16, and before any investigation, the Western Australian state premier vilified the impoverished Afghans, declaring that they had deliberately doused their vessel with petrol and ignited it. The federal opposition criticised Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd for weakening Australia's "border protection"—the use of the navy and offshore detention centres to prevent asylum seekers from reaching Australian shores. Rudd responded by declaring that Labor was just as tough on "border security" and denounced "people smugglers" as "evil" and the "lowest form of human life".

Behind these positions lies, first and foremost, a callous indifference to the plight of millions of ordinary people driven by desperate circumstances to seek refuge in other countries. The latest global report of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees estimates there are 11.4 million refugees, most of them from impoverished and war-torn countries. The flood of asylum seekers leaving Afghanistan and Iraq, for example, is a product of the US-led neo-colonial occupations that Australian governments have backed to the hilt. Those seeking asylum in Australia during the past year—a total of 4,750—form a tiny percentage of

the 383,000 applications made last year in industrialised countries.

Australia is not the only country that imposes physical and legal barriers to those whose only "crime" is to seek a better life for themselves and their families. Nor are Australian politicians the only ones to whip up anti-immigrant xenophobia in times of crisis to divert attention from their own failure to provide jobs, decent housing, education and health care for their citizens. But in Australia, anti-refugee sentiment plays a particularly odious and prominent role, which is deeply rooted in the very formation of Australian capitalism and the consolidation of the nation state in 1901.

The racist "White Australia" immigration policy—which officially excluded all non-European immigrants—was one of the first acts of the newly established Australian parliament. Contrary to myth, its roots do not lie in the Australian people, but in the policy of the British authorities who wanted a stable colonial outpost in the Asia Pacific region. Its purpose was to keep the rebellious Australian working class separate from the oppressed masses in the colonies and semi-colonies of Asia. The Labor Party and the trade unions became the most enthusiastic proponents of White Australia as the country's national ideology. Seeking to derail the class struggle *within* the country, and prevent the emergence of an independent socialist movement, they promoted the reactionary utopian conception that the "working man's paradise" could be secured by excluding the alleged common enemy *outside*.

While overt White Australian racism became untenable by the late 1960s, as the ruling elite

increasingly depended on economic ties with Asia, the underlying conceptions that the impoverished masses of Asia were a “threat”, and that workers’ living standards could only be maintained by sealing the country’s borders and excluding others—remained the basis of the immigration policy of every subsequent government.

The subtext of virtually every statement issued by politicians from both major parties since the Afghans’ boat was intercepted by the navy is that their arrival signals a threat, not merely to Australia’s “border security”, but to the living standards, jobs and social services available to the population as a whole.

These positions are as false and reactionary today as they were at the time of federation, more than 100 years ago. Mounting social problems and economic deprivation are not caused by “foreigners” but by the parasitic operations of the profit system. The world has abundant resources, which, if brought under the rational and democratic control of working people, would be more than capable of providing secure jobs and a decent standard of living, fit for human beings, to everyone on the planet. Under the existing social and economic order, however, these resources are monopolised by a tiny ultra-wealthy elite.

That the current anti-refugee campaign coincides with the onset of recession is no accident. Just as the ruling elite utilised White Australia to derail an upsurge of the working class in the 1890s, a similar political diversion is being drummed up today. Its primary goal is to head off a unified struggle by working people in Australia, throughout the region and internationally, in defence of their own independent class interests amid the greatest crisis of world capitalism since the 1930s.

That the Australian ruling elite is once again reviving the filthy traditions of White Australia is a warning of what will undoubtedly develop in every advanced capitalist country. The notoriously brutal immigration legislation of the former Howard government was closely followed and imitated by governments in a number of countries, most notably Britain. As the economic crisis worsens, racism and the scapegoating of asylum seekers will be stepped up.

Under the profit system, capital is free to roam the globe in pursuit of the most profitable conditions, while ordinary people seeking to establish nothing but a secure life free from violence and hunger, are harassed and punished as criminals. Against this poisonous campaign, the working class of all countries must fight for the right of all people to live and work wherever they wish, with full citizenship rights.

There are no national solutions to the deepening crisis facing working people. What is required is the development of a globally unified movement of the working class, based on an internationalist and socialist perspective aimed at the abolition of capitalism, and the outmoded nation-state system upon which it rests, and the establishment of a planned world economy that will satisfy the economic, social and cultural needs of all.

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