Australia: Latest refugee deaths—the Rudd government's SIEV X

Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
4 November 2009

The tragic drowning of 12 Sri Lankan Tamils northwest of the Cocos Islands on Sunday is another grim reminder that the election of the Rudd Labor government in November 2007 has changed nothing for refugees and asylum seekers.

In October 2001 the Howard government's naval blockade of Australian territorial waters, called Operation Relex, led to the drowning death of 353 asylum seekers, including 150 children, when the SIEV X sank off the northwest coast of Australia, near Christmas Island. The disaster remains largely ignored by Australia's corporate media. Last Sunday's deaths off the Cocos Islands have become the Rudd government's SIEV X.

Labor MPs have spent the past three days feigning concern over the latest disaster, but their immigration policies, which seamlessly continue those of their predecessors—the Keating Labor and the Howard Liberal-National governments—are directly responsible for the tragic loss of life.

According to the latest reports, the refugee boat left Sri Lanka several weeks ago with 39 passengers and attempted to sail directly to Australia via the Indian Ocean. On early Sunday morning and almost 3,000 kilometres from the Australian mainland, the refugees phoned the Australian Maritime Search and Rescue Authority, declaring that the vessel was in distress. Twenty-seven passengers were eventually rescued—some having spent up to 14 hours in the heavy seas. One body was retrieved from the ocean and at least 11 people are still missing, with little chance they will be found alive.

Rudd and other senior ministers have told the local media that the priority is to "save lives". Their hypocrisy is breathtaking. The tragedy is not an unforeseen accident but the inevitable outcome of Labor policies.

Previous refugee boats from Sri Lanka have taken safer routes, hugging the coastline of Indonesia or Malaysia before attempting to sail further south. The direct route to Australia across open seas taken by the latest boat was a response to the Rudd government's beefed up anti-asylum seeker measures.

Over the past ten months Labor has boosted so-called "border protection", spending around $650 million, with increased funds allocated to joint surveillance and under-cover police operations by Australian and Indonesian authorities. Throughout October, the government was intimately involved in the interception and detention of two boats carrying more than 330 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees off the coast of Indonesia. These included the 78 rescued by Australia's Oceanic Viking, now being held under protest on the ship off the coast of Indonesia's Bintan Island.

The Labor government is demanding that these innocent men, women and children be detained in Indonesian immigration centres. It is also trying to negotiate a long-term deal with Jakarta—the so-called Indonesian Solution—under which any refugees detected anywhere outside Australian territorial waters, including in international waters between Australia and Indonesia—will be incarcerated in Indonesia, with Canberra helping foot the bill. Rudd's main priority, like that of Howard before him, is to prevent any refugee travelling by boat from setting foot on Australian soil.

Indonesia is not a signatory to international refugee conventions and it is well known that those sent to its notoriously overcrowded and unhealthy facilities are likely to languish there for years, even if they have already been deemed by the UN to be "official" refugees. (See: "Australian government's "Indonesian Solution" in disarray") It is therefore only by reaching Australian waters before being detected that asylum seekers can have a hope of avoiding such a fate.

Compounding the perilous nature of the journey, the heavy jail terms and mandatory sentencing regime established in Australia for those transporting the

© World Socialist Web Site

refugees—routinely dubbed "people smugglers" by the government and the corporate media—have given rise to new transportation methods. Many refugee boats now approach Australian territorial waters "crewless", because experienced crew on board arrange to be picked up by other vessels before reaching areas under Australian jurisdiction.

Rudd insists that his immigration policies are "humane" and "balanced". But his government's persecution of asylum seekers follows the century-long tradition of the infamous racist White Australia policy, which was pioneered by Labor at the turn of the 20th century and remained a key element of its platform until the early 1960s.

The "Fortress Australia" xenophobia that lay at the heart of White Australia was the ideological cement utilised to subordinate the young and militant Australian working class to the bourgeoisie and the new capitalist state, and to divide it from workers throughout the Asia-Pacific region. When, due to the expansion of its trade with Asia in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the bourgeoisie concluded that the policy in its original form was no longer sustainable, the Labor bureaucracy moved in to modernise it.

In the early 1990s, the Keating Labor government introduced new immigration measures, including mandatory detention of asylum seekers and the rounding up, persecution and deportation of "illegal immigrants" and "visa overstayers". The racist content remained, with Labor's policies primarily targeted at refugees and undocumented workers from the Middle East, Asia and Africa.

In opposition from 1996 to 2007, Labor backed the former Howard government's anti-refugee policies to the hilt, including the excision of Christmas Island and other off-shore islands from Australia's immigration zone and the abolition of all civil court appeals on immigration and refugee cases. Following its election in November 2007, the Rudd government made slight modifications to the Howard government's policies. While these were hailed as a significant progressive shift by sections of the bourgeoisie and Labor's ex-left apologists, they were little more than political window dressing. The measures now in force constitute the Keating-Howard-Rudd anti-refugee policy.

Like its predecessors, Labor continues to detain asylum seekers—men, women and children—on Christmas Island. The numbers granted refugee status are miniscule—4,750 last year—compared to the number of people seeking asylum around the world—42 million—while the rate of deportations is increasing, with 115 deported back to their country of origin so far this year.

In the past fortnight the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), and other sections of the union bureaucracy, have begun to make timid criticisms of the anti-refugee rhetoric emanating from both Labor and the Liberal-National opposition, and called on Canberra to adopt a more "compassionate" policy.

The unions' posturing has nothing to do with defending asylum seekers' democratic rights. On the contrary, they are responding to concerns on the part of sections of business that fear the government's anti-refugee stance will damage their economic interests in Asia. At the same time, they are seeking to head off opposition to the Rudd government's policies among young people, and increasingly among workers, by promoting the illusion that pressure will force Labor to change tack.

Australian workers and young people must reject the entire framework of the so-called immigration and refugee "debate", which is grounded on the reactionary nostrums of exclusivism and on restricting the right of all people to move freely around the world. At the most fundamental level, the global refugee crisis is a product of the excrescences of the capitalist profit system—imperialist war, ethnic cleansing and mass poverty. The latest Tamil refugees are fleeing the catastrophe produced by nearly three decades of civil war, waged by a Colombo regime supported by all the imperialist powers, including Australia.

To take a stand in defence of the democratic rights of the most oppressed layers of the working class requires a new political perspective—in direct opposition to the Labor and trade union apparatuses and their nationalist and chauvinist program. It means fighting for the development of a unified political movement of the working class, regardless of nationality, race or ethnic origin, against the profit system itself, based on the principles of socialist internationalism. Such a movement will champion the removal of all restrictions on immigration, and uphold full citizenship rights for all asylum seekers in whichever country they choose to live, including Australia.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site