

Australian PM Gillard and the reactionary nostrum of “border protection”

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Announcing the revamping of the Australian government’s asylum seeker policy in her speech to the Lowy Institute on Tuesday, Prime Minister Julia Gillard drew deeply from the well of nationalist, xenophobic and racist doctrines that has been a central source of the policies and ideology of the Australian Labor Party throughout its 120-year history.

Following the speech, most media attention was directed to her proposal to set up a “regional processing centre” in East Timor to handle so-called “unauthorised arrivals” and prevent the processing of their claims for refugee status on Australian soil.

This proposal, which Gillard failed to mention to the East Timor government before announcing it in Sydney, has exposed the fraud of the Labor Party’s opposition to the former Howard government’s so-called “Pacific solution”. Under Howard’s policy, asylum seekers were incarcerated for up to five years in remote, desolate detention centres on Nauru and Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island while their claims were being “processed”.

The reactionary core of Gillard’s speech, however, lay not so much in her so-called “Indian Ocean solution” as in the premises on which it was based.

In the days leading up to the policy speech, Gillard had insisted she was responding to “concerns”, especially in the western suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne, over asylum seekers and “border protection”, and that all “political correctness” on this issue had to be swept away. This brought an immediate response from the one-time leader of the right-wing xenophobic One Nation Party, Pauline Hanson, who declared that she was in “total agreement” with the prime minister.

Like Howard, who insisted that Hanson’s racism and xenophobia were giving voice to “community concerns”, Gillard claimed that she was for a “frank, honest national conversation on the issues of border protection and asylum seekers.”

In reality, far from giving voice to “concerns”, Gillard is attempting to *incite* such anti-refugee sentiment in order to divert rising tensions, resulting from worsening social and economic conditions in working-class suburban regions, in a reactionary direction. Her aim is to deflect the anger being generated by increasing unemployment, mounting transport problems, rising housing costs, lack of social facilities and myriad other problems, away from the government and towards immigrants and refugees.

Gillard began by acknowledging the extremely small number of refugees who actually arrive by boats. Remarks by civil rights lawyer Julian Burnside that, at the current rate of arrivals, it would take 20 years to fill the Melbourne Cricket Ground (capacity of around 100,000) with “boat people”, was a “point well made”, she said. The number of asylum seekers arriving by boat to Australia was “very, very minor”.

But then followed a series of carefully-coded messages aimed at creating and fuelling popular hostility to asylum seekers.

Throughout her speech Gillard referred to “unauthorised arrivals” and “unauthorised people movements”, noting that the Australian Federal Police had prevented more than 5,000 foreign nationals “coming to our shores illegally” since last September. These comments were intended to create the perception that seeking asylum, whether by boat or some other means, was illegal, and therefore conducted by criminals. In fact international legal covenants, to which Australia is a signatory, insist that all people have the right to flee oppression and danger and that their right to seek sanctuary must be upheld by the government of the country to which they apply.

Gillard’s attack on long-established legal obligations was accompanied by a series of innuendos aimed at reinforcing the arguments of right-wing radio shock jocks and media commentators, as well as followers of Hanson,

that refugees receive privileges.

Gillard insisted that the rule of law had to be applied “properly to those who seek asylum” and that “no one should have an unfair advantage and be able to subvert orderly migration programs.” Not content with insinuating, without any evidence, that asylum seekers were somehow evading the law, Gillard went on to try to stir up further resentments.

“Hardworking Australians,” she declared, “who themselves are doing it tough want to know that refugees allowed to settle here are not singled out for special treatment.” Gillard even invoked her own migrant origins (she was born in Wales) to mobilise resentment against the poorest and most vulnerable members of society, declaring that “my own parents who have worked hard all their lives can’t abide the idea that others might get an inside track to special privileges” for that would “offend the Australian sense of fair play”.

Gillard’s invocation of “Australian fair play” as the basis for her reactionary policy has a long and dishonourable history. The racist White Australia Policy, which formed the central plank of the Labor Party’s platform for more than six decades, was always “justified” by countless Labor leaders and trade union bureaucrats, left and right, on the grounds that it ensured the continuity of the “Australian way of life”. In fact it was the means by which they sought to subordinate the working class to its “own” nation-state and thereby to the capitalist ruling class.

Vast economic changes in the post-war period—the decline of the British Empire and the closer economic integration of Australian capitalism into the rising Asian economic region—saw the Laborites formally abandon White Australia in the mid-1960s. But they retained the nationalist and exclusionist ideology on which it was based.

Under the Hawke and Keating governments, this ideology was invoked in the 1980s as the basis for successive price and incomes “accords”, which resulted in the “restructuring” of the Australian economy, the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs, the transformation of the trade unions into open agencies of the major corporations and the capitalist state, and the smashing up of all independent organisations of the working class. All these measures were held to be in the “national interest”, by making Australian capitalism more competitive.

Now, as another Labor government moves to implement the demands of international finance capital for austerity

measures and a further onslaught against the working class, it seeks to mobilise the anger and social tensions generated by these policies over the past three decades against refugees and asylum seekers.

The working class can only defend itself against these attacks to the extent that it develops its own political independence, not least on the refugee issue.

Politically conscious workers and youth must actively oppose the reactionary nostrums of “border protection” advanced by both the Labor government and the Liberal Party. Furthermore, they must differentiate the independent interests of the working class from the various “small l” liberal defenders of the rights of asylum seekers and refugees, such as Burnside and the Greens.

While they denounce the policies of Gillard and Abbott, these critics have fundamental agreement with them. They accept that, in the final analysis, there must be some form of “border protection” and definite restrictions on the number of immigrants and refugees. In other words, they ultimately agree with the infamous slogan advanced by Howard in the 2001 election campaign that “we determine who comes here and the circumstances in which they come”—the only difference being on the manner of its implementation.

Against both the outright reactionaries and the liberals, Australian workers must champion the fundamental right of workers everywhere to travel, to live and to work anywhere in the world. Money and its possessors can move freely around the globe. The working class must demand nothing less.

The fight for this principle will advance the independent interests of the working class. It will begin to demonstrate that escalating social and economic problems stem not from immigration and a growing population, much less from refugees and asylum seekers, but are rooted in the global crisis of the capitalist economy, and the subordination of the world’s people to the dictates of the profit system. Such a fight will establish that these problems cannot be resolved through “border protection” but only through the economic reorganisation of society on an international scale to replace the private profit system with a democratically planned world economy to meet human need.



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