

Australia: Labor government defends mandatory detention in face of asylum-seeker protests

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Desperate protests by asylum seekers in the wake of the suicide of Josefa Rauluni, a Fijian detainee at Sydney's Villawood Detention Centre on Monday, have been met with complete indifference by the Gillard Labor government.

Eleven asylum-seekers at Villawood ended their roof-top protest on Tuesday night after officials from the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) agreed to review their cases. According to refugee advocates, some of the protesters were told that their claims for asylum would be "re-examined". But the Gillard Labor government has made clear there would be no change to its anti-immigrant "border protection" measures.

Speaking yesterday, Labor's Minister for Immigration Chris Bowen said, "The protesters did ask to speak to the UNHCR which happened, but it was made clear that they would need to come down from the roof before that would happen and that there would be no change at all to their claims or the processing of their claims." In remarks reminiscent of those of the previous Howard government, Bowen declared: "Our immigration officials determine who gets asylum after a very rigorous process." He insisted that protests would make no difference whatsoever.

Jamal Daoud, from the Social Justice Network, said that despite assurances that they would not be penalised for their protest, the men had been placed in isolation.

Bala Vigneswaran from the Australian Tamil Congress visited the detainees last night. Vigneswaran said some of the men had been held in detention since arriving at Christmas Island on June 28, 2009. If their application for

asylum in Australia was rejected, Vigneswaran warned, the men "should not be returned to Sri Lanka under any circumstances" as they believed that they would face certain death.

On September 3, Amnesty International reported that three men who had been deported by the Rudd Labor government in 2009 after being held at the Christmas Island detention centre, had been jailed and tortured after their return to Sri Lanka.

Despite the government's warnings, another nine asylum seekers facing deportation began a new roof-top protest at Villawood yesterday. The group of nine Chinese nationals—five men and four women, including one pregnant woman—have been on a hunger strike since Rauluni's committed suicide by jumping off the roof of the detention centre on Monday morning.

In a separate hunger strike at the same facility, three Kurdish and Iranian people, whose applications for asylum were rejected, have been hospitalised. "Obviously, this has no effect on the outcome of their cases," responded a Department of Immigration spokesman.

Despite concerted efforts by the Immigration Department to portray Rauluni as a "visa-overstayer", correspondence leaked to the media revealed that he faced danger if he returned to Fiji, due to his activities in the country's pro-democracy movement. Laisenia Qarase, the deposed Fijian prime minister, wrote to the Refugee Review Tribunal last November stating that, "Under the current circumstances in Fiji, Mr Rauluni runs the risk of being taken in by the regime if he returns to Fiji".

Interviewed on ABC radio's "AM" program this week, Bowen was unmoved, "I understand that emotions run very high when it comes to asylum claims, but it is down to our officials and our tribunals to determine the cases on all the facts."

In a shocking report today, the sister-in-law of Josefa Rauluni expressed anger that his body had been left lying on the ground for five hours after his death. Fellow detainees also allege that staff employed by SERCO, the private contractor that runs the Villawood facility, placed mattresses on the ground and urged Rauluni to jump onto them.

With protests continuing, Prime Minister Gillard is pursuing an offshore processing centre for asylum-seekers that was a key Labor platform in the recent federal election. She announced this morning that Bowen would travel to East Timor to meet with officials there about setting up a facility in the impoverished nation.

Labor is bulldozing ahead with expanded "border control" measures despite warnings from mental health experts that overcrowding in detention centres, extensive delays in the processing of asylum seeker claims and offshore processing is likely to lead to the kind of extreme examples of self-harm that were exhibited in the Woomera and Baxter detention centres in 2002.

Speaking on ABC Radio National's "Breakfast" program, Professor Louise Newman, who heads the Australian government's health advisory panel on immigration detention, warned that self-harm by detainees was on the increase, and recalled "...the days of Baxter and Woomera, where self-harm was massive, where many in the community found that very confronting to see people sewing their mouths up and cutting themselves. Again, we're starting to see the beginnings of those sorts of behaviours. And those behaviours will occur, not just in immigration detention centres, but in any other situations where people are highly stressed and confined. So, in a sad way, we know that these things are likely to happen. Our concern is that we're seeing a regression back to the sorts of policies and procedures that contributed to massive outbreaks of self-harm and mental health problems in the past."

Newman accused "both sides of politics" of

perpetuating the inhumane mandatory detention regime responsible for the crisis. "Other than Australia and Malta, the rest of the world does not arbitrarily detain every single asylum seeker, let alone have children in secure facilities."

Mandatory detention was first introduced under the Keating Labor government in 1992. On June 24 this year, within hours of seizing the Labor leadership from ousted Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, Gillard flagged her government would resume the whipping up of anti-immigrant racism in an attempt to divert hostility to the crisis in social infrastructure, mounting economic and social hardship and the lack of decent jobs. Anti-immigrant rhetoric was a major feature of Labor's campaign, with Gillard insisting that she was more determined and more capable of pursuing a closed border policy and harsher treatment of refugees and asylum seekers than the Liberals.

Since the campaign the number of refugees in detention has continued to rise, due, in part, to a processing freeze on applications of Afghan and Sri Lankan asylum seekers, with many being held for long periods of time.

The assault on the democratic rights of asylum seekers, who form one of the most vulnerable sections of society, are a prelude to similar attacks on ever-wider layers of the population. The working class as a whole must come to their defence, and uphold the fundamental rights of all people, whatever their nationality, to live and work in the country of their choice, without restriction and with full citizenship rights. Such rights can be won only through the development of an independent movement of the working class, fighting for a socialist perspective. That requires a complete political break with Labor, and its alliance partner, the Greens, which accepts the entire framework of Labor's immigration restrictions, calling for a speedier processing of claims, and the immediate repatriation of all refugees found to be "not genuine".



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