

The Australian refugee boat disaster and the Labor government's "border protection" regime

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The deaths of an estimated 50 men, women, and children in the December 15 refugee boat disaster off the coast of Australia, is the latest devastating consequence of the Labor government's militarised "border protection" regime. Openly contemptuous of international legal conventions on asylum seekers and the democratic rights of those seeking to enter the country, the entire political establishment upholds the "right" of the Australian state to police its borders and restrict the arrival of refugees and immigrants.

Attacks on the rights of asylum seekers and immigrants are escalating in Europe, North America, and internationally. Hundreds of people attempting to flee Africa drown each year in the Mediterranean Sea as a result of xenophobic immigration policies in Italy and other southern European countries. Deaths are a similarly routine occurrence along the US-Mexico border, which is now surveilled by unmanned predator drones and 20,000 border patrol agents. At the same time, governments are targeting immigrants and refugees already living within their borders. The US state of Arizona has attempted to tear up the basic constitutional rights of workers of Latin American origin; the French government has carried out mass deportations of Roma people; throughout Europe, Muslims have been systematically victimised.

In every instance these measures have been accompanied by reactionary campaigns that scapegoat immigrants and refugees for declining living standards and unemployment. The purpose is to divert attention from the real source of the social crisis—the capitalist profit system itself, and the vicious austerity measures

now aimed at permanently undermining the social position of the working class throughout the world.

In Australia, racism and xenophobia were embedded in the nation-state from its very establishment. The Labor Party played the central role in subordinating the working class to the capitalist state by promoting the conception that its living standards could only be maintained through the exclusion of the Asian "yellow peril", via the "White Australia" immigration policy. While this regime was formally abandoned several decades ago, the official reaction to the latest refugee disaster underscores that its central ideological tenets remain.

Ordinary people have responded with immense sympathy to the plight of the Iraqi, Iranian, and Kurdish refugees aboard the boat that smashed into the cliffs of Christmas Island. Harrowing accounts continue to emerge from the 42 survivors. Three children were orphaned after their parents drowned, including an Iranian boy aged about 8 who had no other family members in Australia, until two aunts subsequently arrived on another boat. The Labor government's immigration minister has become the legal guardian of the three orphans—bringing the total of unaccompanied asylum seeker children held in privately-operated detention centres to 448.

The political establishment has responded with utter indifference to the refugees' suffering. Serious questions about why Australian authorities failed to intercept the boat before it disintegrated—and how, allegedly, no-one in the navy, customs, or federal

police had monitored the vessel after it left Indonesia—have been suppressed or ignored. Moreover, there is now a concerted campaign underway—led by the Murdoch press—to exploit the disaster to forge an even more draconian asylum seeker regime.

Not surprisingly, since anti-refugee rhetoric has been at the very centre of her political ascent, Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard is in the forefront of this campaign. Gillard first rose to national prominence in 2001 and 2002, when, as opposition population and immigration spokesperson she aligned the Labor Party with the Howard government's xenophobic attacks on, and slanders against, asylum seekers. As soon as she became prime minister, following the US-backed coup against Kevin Rudd last June, she demanded an end to "political correctness" regarding refugees and expressed her sympathy with those who insisted that asylum seekers were receiving "special treatment". In the federal election last August, she made a point of attacking immigration levels, suggesting that deteriorating public transport, hospitals, and other social services was due to overpopulation.

Every parliamentary tendency is complicit in this filthy campaign, including the Greens and so-called parliamentary independents. For all their various criticisms of the major parties' approach, they fully agree with its underlying premise, namely, the need for "border protection"—that is, restricted entry and exclusions.

The logic of this premise is that force is ultimately necessary to "defend" the country's "borders". That is why independent MP Andrew Wilkie accuses the Liberal Party of inciting "dark sentiments" on the one hand, while demanding stepped up Australian police and intelligence activities in Indonesia to disrupt and sabotage refugee boats to prevent them leaving for Australia. In like manner, Greens refugee spokesperson, Sarah Hanson-Young has called for a relatively minor increase in the number of refugees allowed in, signalling her agreement with the rejection of all others. The Greens regularly avow their support for the deportation of those refugees who fail to meet the narrow official criteria for refugee status.

The working class in Australia must adopt its own independent position, based on the recognition of the inalienable democratic right of every person to live and work in whichever part of the globe they wish. The powers-that-be assume, without argument, the "right" of capital to roam the planet in pursuit of profitable opportunities opened up by the globalised "free market". The ultra-wealthy face no problems residing in any country—or countries—of their choosing. But this right is systematically denied to working people and the oppressed masses of the world.

The class interests of Australian workers are the same as those of workers everywhere, including those who seek to flee persecution, violence and poverty. These interests are the right to a decent job, living and working conditions; a decent future for the next generation; free access to high quality educational, medical and other services; and full democratic rights. The rejection of the entire reactionary framework of "border protection" is a critical condition for preparing the ground for a unified revolutionary struggle of the Australian working class with its counterparts throughout Asia and internationally in defence of these rights. This can only be carried forward on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective aimed at the overturn of the crisis-ridden profit system and the reorganisation of economic life along socialist lines, ensuring social equality among all the world's people.

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