

Australian government uses tear gas and synthetic bullets to suppress refugee protests

Carolyn Kennett, SEP candidate for Auburn
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In a clear demonstration of the criminal character of its “border protection” and mandatory detention regime, the Gillard Labor government has supported Australian Federal Police (AFP) units firing tear gas canisters and potentially lethal “bean bag” bullets at protesting refugees inside the immigration detention centre on Christmas Island this week. At least one detainee was badly wounded, reportedly suffering a broken leg as the result of being hit by one of the synthetic bullets. After a week of escalating clashes on the remote Indian Ocean island, the Labor government has mobilised nearly 200 AFP personnel to take command of the locked-down facility, in an attempt to suppress further protests.

The government’s actions are in flagrant violation of international refugee law, which upholds the right to flee persecution. And the entire political establishment—Labor, Liberals and the Greens—is responsible for maintaining a system that uses the military to block refugees from exercising their right to seek asylum, then incarcerates those who make it to land by boat indefinitely without trial. The violence unleashed this week is the inevitable outcome of that policy.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard publicly backed the resort to CS gas and 12-gauge bullets made of lead and fabric, and declared that such weaponry could also be used to deal with similar disturbances anywhere across the country. She declared she “underst[ood] the reaction of police” and that sometimes police had to make judgment calls on whether to use such weapons “whether it’s on Christmas Island or it’s in a CBD of one of our capital cities on a Saturday night.”

Immigration Minister Chris Bowen accused the detainees of “violent and unacceptable behaviour” and warned that they could face serious criminal charges and lengthy jail terms. Bowen also threatened to use his personal power to block or revoke their protection visas, on the grounds of “bad character,” even if they were accepted as genuine refugees. In other words, the detainees are being further persecuted for protesting against their illegal treatment.

Initially, peaceful protests broke out last week inside Christmas Island’s severely over-crowded North West Point facility, where many of the 1,850 detainees have been held for more than a year, in a centre originally built for 400. In numerous cases, the prisoners have already been classified as refugees, but kept in detention awaiting security clearances from the government’s political spy agency, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO). Two weeks ago, it was revealed that some

900 of the more than 6,500 asylum seekers held in Australia’s immigration detention centres were waiting for ASIO security checks, and that 481 of them had been detained for more than a year.

On March 11 and 12, between 150 and 200 asylum seekers broke out of the North West Point facility to stage demonstrations on roadways in an attempt to draw public attention to their plight and demand the urgent processing of their visa applications. Some marched to the Christmas Island airport, where they staged a sit-in protest before returning to the detention centre.

In the early hours of Monday March 14, what the government described as a riot broke out after the AFP and immigration officials moved in to seize 11 asylum seekers accused of being the ringleaders of the weekend protest, and lock them in separate cells. According to the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, a number of other inmates approached those cells to release the detainees. The AFP arrived and opened fire, using gas and bean bag bullets against the protestors, wounding one in the leg.

Further protests erupted throughout the week, provoked by the punitive response of the government and the authorities. Refugee advocate Pamela Curr said Serco, the private contractor operating the facility, fuelled the discontent by locking down roller doors between different parts of the centre to prevent movement by inmates. Tensions reached a new height last Thursday when detainees received a letter from the government promising to speed up ASIO processing, but announcing that officials due to arrive this week to assess visa applications could not come because of the riots.

That evening, about 250 protesting detainees battled against police for some four hours, reportedly throwing rocks at the AFP contingent sent to take over the facility. During the course of the confrontation, detainees burnt down seven of the tents and two of the portable huts used as accommodation. AFP deputy commissioner for national security, Steve Lancaster, said police had used a “higher volume” of bean bag bullets in order to “restore order”.

In an attempt to whitewash what could have been fatal violence against the refugees, the government has announced several official reviews to examine the appropriateness of the response of Serco, the immigration department and the police. One review will be conducted by two former senior public servants, another by the Ombudsman and a third by the AFP itself. As the comments already made by Gillard and Bowen indicate, the conclusions are

foregone. Their purpose will be to legitimise the violent suppression of detainee protests.

Indignation and frustration is not confined to the refugees incarcerated on Christmas Island. In the northern city of Darwin, nine inmates occupied the roof of the Berrimah immigration facility for 24 hours from Tuesday night after an asylum seeker was chased and assaulted by two guards. The detainees were part of a group of Rohingya Burmese refugees who were angered by their 18-month detention as they await ASIO checks.

On Thursday, about 100 asylum seekers gathered for a protest inside the desolate camp at the Curtin air base near Derby in Western Australia's northern Kimberley region. In January, detainees at Curtin carried out a fortnight-long hunger strike, with some of them hospitalised.

On Friday, a 17-year-old Iraqi teenager staged an all-day protest at the Broadmeadows immigration centre in Melbourne. He climbed into a tree and threatened to jump, reportedly after receiving an adverse ASIO assessment, meaning he faces deportation.

On the same day, in the far northeast of the country, at the Scherger detention centre in a disused air base near Weipa, 2,400 kilometres from Brisbane, the body of a 20-year-old Afghan asylum seeker was found in his quarters, apparently the result of suicide. He had been held at Scherger since October, along with nearly 300 other men, since being transferred from Christmas Island.

These events follow a string of hunger strikes, suicides and protests at other facilities, including Sydney's Villawood detention centre, where groups of detainees staged sit-ins on a roof last September after one Fijian inmate jumped to his death from the building.

Many more asylum seekers are being incarcerated under the Labor government than were held by the conservative Howard Liberal government. About 3,000—almost half the total—have been in detention for between 6 and 12 months and around 700 unaccompanied children are also being detained.

Mental health professionals, including the government's own detention health task force chairperson, Professor Louise Newman, have warned that detainees' mental health inevitably deteriorates after 12 months of incarceration, especially when they remain in limbo, not knowing when, or if, they will be released.

In 2007, Labor was elected with promises that its asylum seeker policies would be more humane than those of Howard. Since then it has opened more centres around the country, most in isolated locations, and stepped up naval patrols designed to deter or repel refugee boats. The deaths of an estimated 50 men, women, and children on December 15, when a stricken boat crashed into the rocky shore of Christmas Island, highlighted the devastating consequences of Labor's "border protection" regime.

The Greens, who have formed an alliance with the minority Gillard government, are equally culpable. Their immigration spokesperson, Senator Sarah Hanson-Young, issued a mealy-mouthed media release in response to the AFP's actions, saying there "seems to be an excessive use of force" at Christmas Island, and backing the government's proposed reviews. While the Greens have suggested modifications to the detention regime, they

remain committed to maintaining border controls and immigration restrictions.

Not just in Australia but around the world, governments are taking increasingly draconian measures to crack down on asylum seekers. On every continent, these measures are accompanied by xenophobic campaigns blaming immigrants and refugees for declining living standards and unemployment. The purpose is to distract attention from the real source of the social crisis—government austerity programs and the capitalist profit system itself.

The Socialist Equality Party insists that those who flee persecution and poverty must have the same basic social rights as workers everywhere: the right to a decent job, living and working conditions; free access to high quality educational, medical and other services; and full democratic rights. These social rights can only be secured through the development of a unified political movement of all layers of the working class, irrespective of nationality, ethnicity, colour or religion, entirely independent of the old national-based parties—such as Labor and the Greens—and based on a socialist and internationalist perspective.

In our election statement, we say: "The working class must unite internationally on the perspective of establishing a world planned socialist economy that is rationally and democratically organised to meet the needs of the entire world's population. In striving for the international unity of the working class, workers must oppose every form of nationalism, discrimination and racism, particularly the persecution of immigrants and refugees, and uphold the right of all workers to live wherever they wish, with full citizenship rights."

The author recommends:

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