

The Australian Labor Party and the live cattle export furore

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So-called left-wing parliamentarians within the Labor government have staged what the media has breathlessly described as a cabinet “revolt” over live cattle exports to Indonesia. Following the exposure of animal cruelty in Indonesian abattoirs, the “lefts” rejected Agriculture Minister Joe Ludwig’s initial proposal to hold an inquiry before taking action and instead instigated a six-month ban on all live cattle exports.

The episode has been marked by staggering hypocrisy. The self-declared “progressive” wing of the Australian political establishment—ranging from the Labor “left” to the Greens and online lobby group GetUp!—has trumpeted its concern for the welfare of the country’s cattle, while maintaining a deafening silence on other government policies such as the pending deportation of refugees to Malaysia and the war in Libya. Again exposed is the wretched character of the various official “left” tendencies that play an important role in propping up Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s right-wing agenda.

On May 30, the ABC’s “Four Corners” program showed footage taken by an animal rights organisation inside Indonesian abattoirs, featuring terrible instances of cruelty and mistreatment. Within hours of the broadcast, GetUp! sought to co-opt widespread public concern by organising an online petition demanding a suspension of cattle exports to Indonesia and a ban on all live animal exports within three years. The Greens also announced their intention to introduce legislation along the similar lines, while various Labor government backbenchers from the party’s Left faction suddenly found their voice on the issue.

Unsurprisingly, amid the furore, no-one raised the clear connection between the situation in Indonesian abattoirs and the profit system.

“Four Corners” broadcast footage not only showed gratuitously cruel behaviour by individual abattoir workers, but also that the systematic abuse was a consequence of the abattoir infrastructure constructed by the Australian cattle industry. The industry body, the Meat & Livestock Australia (MLA), and the federal government jointly funded the provision of metal “slaughter restraint boxes.” Individual cattle are herded into the boxes, before a door is opened to a wet and steep concrete ramp that causes the cows to slip over and repeatedly smash their heads on the hard floor before finally being slaughtered. Stunning devices, which instantly render cattle unconscious before being killed, were apparently too expensive to be provided along with the boxes.

This situation is the consequence of having food production determined on the basis of corporate profit. Live cattle export is big business in Australia—with an estimated value of \$300 million a year—and giant transnational abattoir interests and agribusiness enterprises dominate the industry.

While these issues have been obscured in the official “debate” on the cattle trade, a definite xenophobic undercurrent has been evident in some of the commentary. Notably, Labor “left” Kelvin Thomson—best known for his campaign to slash the annual immigrant and refugee intake—was among the most prominent MPs demanding a ban on exports to Indonesia.

Significantly, none of these layers in the Labor Party has said a word about the brutal treatment of refugees. Their “compassion” and “morality” evidently extends to animals but not to people who have fled danger, repression and poverty to seek a better life for themselves.

As a result of Labor’s mandatory detention regime, there are now more than 5,000 people, including over 1,000 children, imprisoned indefinitely while their asylum claims are processed. The conditions amount to psychological torture, with large numbers of already traumatised refugees suffering from severe mental health problems caused by their experiences behind bars.

Similarly, for all the feigned outrage over the live cattle trade, Gillard’s “live refugee trade” has provoked no equivalent concern in official “left” circles.

The Labor government recently announced that it will exchange the next 800 asylum seekers who arrive in Australia by sea for 4,000 refugees currently detained in Malaysia. The arrangement is an extraordinary attack on the basic legal and democratic rights of refugees. Under international law, the right to asylum cannot be distinguished on the basis of the entry mode of transport used by the refugees. The UN has condemned the Australian policy as unlawful. Yet the Gillard government is preparing for mass deportations, without any consideration given to the legitimacy of asylum claims. Pregnant women and unaccompanied children will be among those expelled and forced to endure appalling conditions in Malaysia. Not a single Labor parliamentarian has raised any objections to this policy.

Similarly, GetUp!, which sprang into action over the mistreatment of cattle, has adamantly refused to campaign against the Malaysian plan. The organisation’s director Simon Sheikh last week told the *Australian* that he would only focus on lobbying the government to deliver on its bogus promise to remove children from Australian detention centres, because “we have to fight this on what we can achieve in this space”. The Greens have said they disagree with the

Malaysia plan—but do not regard the issue as warranting any reassessment of their alliance with the minority Labor government. Greens MPs will continue to vote for the Gillard government’s budgets, including the provisions funding Labor’s callous “border protection” regime.

Likewise in relation to the war in Libya. In the 11 days since the “Four Corners” program on the live cattle trade was broadcast, US and NATO forces have intensified their criminal bombardment of Libya, with sorties over the defenceless country demolishing civilian government buildings and damaging homes, hospitals, and schools. The entire operation, the *World Socialist Web Site* has noted, constitutes one of the most naked acts of imperialist aggression since the illegal wars launched in the 1930s by fascist Germany and Italy. Yet, the Labor-Green-protest milieu supports the bogus humanitarian pretext for the campaign and has not raised any objections to the mounting violence.

The campaign over the live cattle trade is clearly being utilised by these political forces as a diversion, with the so-called revolt against Gillard and her agriculture minister serving as useful cover for the role of these “lefts” in supporting and facilitating the Labor government’s right-wing agenda.



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