

Ten years on: The SIEV X tragedy and the assault on democratic rights

The Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
31 October 2011

Despite the almost total media blackout of the 10th anniversary of the drowning on October 19, 2001 of 353 refugees who were trying to reach Australia in an over-crowded boat, the political stench has not diminished.

Still deeply shocked by the tragedy—Australia’s worst-ever civilian loss of life—thousands of people have contributed to memorials to the hundreds of innocent victims aboard the vessel known only as SIEV X. A display of 353 poles, created by more than 300 schools and community groups, sits on Canberra’s lakeshore. Other memorials have been established in schools and locations around the country, including on Christmas Island, where SIEV X had been headed.

While few accept the official explanation that the authorities—political, military and public service—had no knowledge of the impending tragedy, and could have done nothing about it, there is scant appreciation of the fact that the SIEV X disaster was a sharp expression of a fundamental turning point in political life in Australia and around the world. The ten years since have witnessed an unrelenting and ever-escalating assault on democratic rights, fuelled by the deepening crisis of global capitalism, and marked by militarism abroad, an unprecedented growth of social inequality at home, and the turn by governments everywhere to bring forward authoritarian and repressive measures to deal with mounting class conflict.

Substantial evidence implicates ministers within the former Howard government for knowingly allowing the refugees to drown, and for refusing to mount a rescue. Their goal was to establish a powerful disincentive for other asylum seekers to attempt similar voyages and, on the basis of a xenophobic, anti-refugee campaign that trumpeted the government’s success in “border protection”, win the 2001 federal election. That a decade on, no-one has been held to account, no investigation has been held and the cover-up has simply been allowed to continue, underscores the chilling fact that there is no longer any constituency for democratic rights within the Labor Party, the Liberal-National coalition, the legal system or, indeed, the Australian political establishment as a whole.

Just over a month before the SIEV X broke up and sank in waters that were under constant and intense surveillance by the Australian military, the Bush administration in the US had launched the so-called “war on terrorism”, in the wake of the September 11 attack on the US.

In a desperate attempt to offset its historic decline, Washington seized upon the 9/11 terrorist assault as a pretext for launching long-

planned wars of aggression in Central Asia and the Middle East to establish its hegemony over the world’s most oil- and gas-rich regions against its European and Asian rivals. The Howard government gave unconditional support, with backing from the Labor opposition, and deployed troops and substantial resources to the criminal neo-colonial invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. In return, Washington gave the green light to Canberra’s imperialist agenda, including ousting elected governments in the Solomon Islands and East Timor to shore up its own—and Washington’s—financial and geo-strategic interests in the Asia Pacific region, particularly against the growing incursions of China.

The first domestic targets of the “war on terror” were refugees and ordinary working people of Middle Eastern descent, along with Muslims of all nationalities, especially youth. The Howard government’s campaign was taken up by Labor and by the media, and fanned into hysterical proportions by right wing talk-back radio hosts. Warnings of terrorists disguised as asylum seekers travelling by boat to infiltrate the country; pre-dawn police raids, arrests on trumped up “terror charges”, and sensationalised court trials were orchestrated to create a climate of fear and intimidation.

The fundamental right, under both international and domestic law, to seek asylum, was simply trashed. Naval warships were dispatched to turn back boats in the middle of the Indian Ocean, directly threatening lives, or to transport them to remote Pacific islands, leaving many of their traumatised passengers in virtual concentration camps for years. Australia’s offshore islands were “excised” from the visa system to cut off refugees’ access to the courts. The Howard government beefed up the mandatory detention laws first introduced by the Keating Labor government in 1992, incarcerating thousands of those men, women and children who did make it to the mainland in desolate, far-flung detention centres, where they often faced years in limbo and eventual deportation.

The Socialist Equality Party warned in its 2001 federal election statement, issued 12 days after the SIEV X drownings: “In their unified descent into open state thuggery against thousands of desperate ‘boat people’, both parties have revealed their true colours. Neither Howard nor [former Labor leader] Beazley has any solution to the economic and social crisis facing working people. Unable to address the fears and insecurities created by their own policies, they turn on the most vulnerable sections of society.”

The measures carried out against refugees were the starting point of

an unprecedented decade-long assault on the democratic rights of the entire population. A barrage of laws was passed between 2002 and 2005 that defined terrorism in sweeping terms that can cover many forms of political expression. The security agencies were handed far-reaching surveillance and interrogation powers as well as the powers of “preventative” detention without charge and virtual house arrest via “control orders.”

The Howard government was complicit in the US administration’s use of previously unthinkable abuses—indefinite detention in legal “black holes” such as Guantánamo Bay, secret “rendition” flights and torture. With Canberra’s endorsement, two Australian citizens—David Hicks and Mamdouh Habib—were held for years by the American military and subjected to physical and psychological abuse.

In 2007, the military was mobilised for an unprecedented domestic intervention—against indigenous people in Australia’s Northern Territory. On the trumped-up pretext of cracking down on child abuse, the Coalition government rode roughshod over the basic rights of Aborigines, who became the first target of a wider drive to dismantle welfare entitlements.

The election of the Rudd Labor government in 2007 saw a seamless political transition. Under both Kevin Rudd and then Julia Gillard, who replaced him in June 2010 through an anti-democratic coup carried out behind the backs of the population, the deepening of the anti-democratic onslaught has continued. Labor had already ditched its promise of a judicial inquiry into the SIEV X disaster in 2004, and has subsequently blocked two Senate motions for an official investigation, in 2008 and earlier this month. Last December, the Gillard Labor government had its own “SIEV X”, when a boat crashed against the cliffs of Christmas Island after Australian authorities ignored warnings about the approaching vessel. At least 50 asylum seekers died as a result, although the exact number remains unknown.

Under Prime Minister Gillard, Labor is now outdoing the Howard government in persecuting refugees. Almost 5,000 asylum seekers—including 512 women and 848 children—are currently languishing under indefinite detention in inhuman facilities around the country. In an effort to revive its “Malaysian Solution”, Gillard is seeking to overturn a High Court ruling that found that her government’s plan to deport asylum seekers to Malaysia—a country that is not a signatory to the Refugee Convention—was in breach of international and domestic law.

All the essential features of the “counter-terrorism” regime of the Howard government have been retained and extended, and new offences, such as terrorist “hoaxes” have been added. The resources and powers of the Australian Federal Police and intelligence agencies have been boosted to levels far exceeding those under Howard.

At the same time, the Gillard government has given its unwavering support to the Obama administration’s wars of aggression, which have extended to Pakistan and Libya, and to its criminal methods. Not one objection has been raised to the remote-controlled assassinations of American citizens, along with hundreds of Afghans and Pakistanis, by CIA drones. And far from defending the Australian citizen Julian Assange from likely extradition to the US, the Labor government has

joined Washington in seeking to silence the WikiLeaks founder, whose only “offence” has been to expose the skulduggery and crimes of American imperialism.

A decade after the sinking of the SIEV X, the implications of what was allowed to happen to its 353 passengers have become far clearer. Under conditions of the deepening crisis of global capitalism, and sharpening economic, political and social tensions, the callous and calculated disregard for human life was no aberration, or isolated incident, but part of a definite political shift within the entire official establishment to abandon any, even nominal, adherence to democratic and legal norms.

What began as an assault on the most vulnerable layers of society—refugees and Aborigines—is being rapidly extended to the broader population. The universal response of the political representatives of finance and corporate capital, including the Australian Labor government, to dissent and resistance to their programs of austerity and social inequality is violence and open repression. The attacks unleashed against protesters in Egypt at the beginning of the year now find their parallels in the police state violence and mass arrests of the anti-Wall Street demonstrators in the US, and their counterparts internationally, including in Sydney and Melbourne.

The SIEV X tragedy serves as a timely reminder that the ruling elites and their governments will stop at nothing to defend their power and privileges. Basic social, legal and democratic rights cannot be secured within the framework of parliamentary pressure politics, but require the independent political mobilisation of the working class to overturn the bankrupt capitalist profit system and establish a workers’ government, dedicated to transforming society in the interests of the vast majority, not a tiny wealthy elite. Amid the revolutionary upheavals now beginning to emerge globally, that means workers and young people turning to the socialist and internationalist program advanced by the Socialist Equality Party and participating in the fight to build it.



To contact the WWSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wwsw.org/contact