Australian Labor Party conference endorses plans to expel refugees

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In a further sharp shift to the right, last weekend's Australian Labor Party (ALP) national conference retrospectively sanctioned the Gillard government's efforts to forcibly remove asylum seekers to Malaysia or any other impoverished Asia Pacific country that will agree to become a dumping ground for refugees.

Since the backroom political coup that installed Julia Gillard as prime minister last year, the Labor government has sought to deport asylum seekers arriving by boat to a series of countries—first East Timor, then Malaysia and Papua New Guinea (PNG). Rebuffed by East Timor, Gillard eventually signed a deal with the Malaysian government. This was in conflict with the ALP's official policy platform before the conference, which formally opposed the "offshore processing" pursued by the previous Howard Liberal government that shipped refugees to detention in Nauru and PNG.

The platform adopted last weekend states support for "regional cooperation and bilateral arrangements," effectively backing the government's determination to push ahead with its so-called "Malaysian solution." Under this scheme, 800 asylum seekers arriving by boat would be forcibly transferred to Malaysia, in return for accepting 4,000 refugees processed by the UN in Malaysia.

The Gillard government remains intent on getting legislation though parliament to overturn a ruling by the High Court, Australia's supreme court, that the scheme was unlawful because it violated some elementary procedures to protect the rights of refugees. Malaysia is not a signatory to the international refugee convention, which prohibits the return of refugees to face persecution. As a result Labor's scheme was a blatant violation of the global treaty.

By endorsing the Malaysian plan, the conference rubberstamped the government's flouting of basic legal and democratic rights of refugees, as well as the ALP's formal platform.

As a supposed concession to asylum seekers, Immigration Minister Chris Bowen proposed a gradual increase in the annual intake of authorised refugees from 13,750 to 20,000. This would remain a drop in the ocean compared to the estimated 43 million people fleeing oppression internationally. Bowen stressed that his proposal committed the government to nothing, telling ABC radio before the conference: "It's an aspiration…There's no timeline."

On the conference floor, Home Affairs Minister Brendan O'Connor cynically invoked the deaths of 50 refugees last December when their boat crashed onto rocks at Christmas Island, an Australian outpost in the Indian Ocean. Having blocked any examination of how the boat's plight could have remained undetected by the government's intensive military and police surveillance operations to hunt down refugee vessels, O'Connor again exploited the tragedy to insist that deterrence measures had to be stepped up to stop boat arrivals.

O'Connor also cited the SIEV X tragedy of October 2001, in which a boat carrying refugees sank in the waters between Indonesia and Australia, drowning 353 men, women and children. Like the current government, that of John Howard seized upon the SIEV X disaster—Australia's worst ever civilian loss of life—to deter refugees and seek to justify its "Pacific Solution" of transporting asylum seekers to remote island detention camps. As with the December 15 tragedy, there is no reason to accept the Howard government's assertions that its military, police and security authorities had no knowledge of the impending disaster and could have done nothing to avert it.

The conference also saw a marked shift in the stance of the Labor for Refugees group, which opposed the acceptance of the government's refugee dumping plans. In the first place, while the group called for rejection of "offshore

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processing," its opposition was based on fears of further damage to Labor's dim electoral prospects, as well as secondary factors, including the excessive costs involved, compared to mainland detention. In an attempt to whitewash the ALP's record, Linda Scott, a Left faction convener of the group, referred to Labor's "longstanding commitment to compassion."

Melissa Parke, a parliamentarian who seconded the Labor for Refugees proposal, described the intention behind the Malaysian agreement as "sound," but misguided because of the Malaysian government's human rights abuses. Parke affirmed her commitment to regional "burden sharing," leaving the door open for future support for expelling asylum seekers to other countries.

Once the government's policy was predictably endorsed by a clear majority—it was a set-piece "debate" with the result known all along—the factions came together to vote for "agreed amendments" that effectively endorsed the mandatory detention of asylum seekers within Australia, with a few cosmetic modifications. The amendments covered measures already announced by the government to try to ease overcrowding in its detention centres by greater resort to "community detention," which means that refugees can live outside the camps, under close monitoring, on temporary bridging visas.

At previous ALP conferences, Labor for Refugees had formally opposed mandatory detention, a regime first introduced by the Keating Labor government in 1992. That stance was dropped at last weekend's gathering, underscoring the group's essential agreement with the entire "border protection" framework of seeking to block refugees from exercising their rights under international law to flee persecution and seek protection.

It is little wonder that during the session, O'Connor expressed his gratitude for the services provided by Labor for Refugees in helping to modify the ALP platform. The token debate demonstrated the basic political function of the Labor for Refugees group. It operates as a mechanism to try to divert public disgust at the party's anti-refugee policy, and corral opposition back inside the ALP.

That role was further illustrated by a lunchtime meeting outside the conference. Hosted by Labor for Refugees, the small gathering was addressed by two Right faction members—Adam Searle, the deputy ALP leader in the New South Wales upper house of parliament, and Shane Prince, a lawyer—alongside Ian Rintoul, a leading figure in Solidarity, a pseudo-left state capitalist group.

Rintoul joined the speakers in urging those present not to give up their efforts to change ALP policy. He even claimed that a progressive "qualitative shift" on refugees was underway in the ALP, precisely because of the token agreed changes to the mandatory detention regime.

Moreover, Rintoul echoed concerns expressed by Searle and Prince that the ALP was harming itself electorally by clinging to the Malaysian agreement. He claimed that the ALP "doesn't realise that the way it is campaigning will take the government to oblivion," opening the way to a Liberal government that would be a "disaster for refugees."

In reality, like the Keating government before it, the Gillard government is seeking to outdo the Liberals in blocking refugee arrivals—so much so that Liberal Party leader Tony Abbott and his colleagues have been able to posture as defenders of refugee rights in criticising the Malaysian agreement.

At the heart of the Gillard government's policy is a bid to make refugees scapegoats to divert attention away from Labor's own record of imposing rising unemployment, the destruction of basic working conditions and the erosion of public services.

By providing a political cover for the ALP, Rintoul himself provides it with an invaluable service. He promotes the illusion that Labor for Refugees is a vehicle for progressive charge right at the point that this group has helped to strengthen the party's anti-refugee policy.

For that reason, both Searle and Prince heaped praise on Rintoul, with Prince describing him as "politically savvy" and a "great fighter for these causes," with "enormous credibility."

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