The reactionary politics of Australian “border protection”

Patrick O’Connor, SEP candidate for Melbourne
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Two refugee boat disasters off Australian waters in recent days that cost the lives of more than 100 people have triggered extraordinary scenes in the parliament in Canberra. Normal proceedings were suspended in the House of Representatives yesterday, and the Senate today, as parliamentarians attempted to reach agreement on new legislation that further flouts international laws governing the treatment of asylum seekers and imposes punitive new sanctions on those fleeing persecution who happen to have arrived in Australia by sea.

The bogus debate is proceeding under the banner of “humanitarianism.” Several parliamentarians wept while recounting the plight of those asylum seekers lost at sea or drowned off the rocky coast of Christmas Island ... only to then demand new laws allowing refugees—men, women, and children—to be deported and dumped in squalid detention camps in South East Asian or South Pacific countries with no rights. This, the major parties insist, is the only way to deter other asylum seekers from making the dangerous ocean voyage to Australia and prevent more drowning disasters.

What a disgusting fraud! The spectacle in Canberra underscores the reactionary politics of the entire framework of “border protection.” As part of my campaign in the Melbourne by-election I am calling on working people and youth to reject the phony debate between the Labor, Liberal, and Greens parties and to defend the unfettered right of every person to live and work wherever they wish in the world, with full and equal citizenship rights. The working class can only defend its interests to the extent that it defends the interests of oppressed people everywhere, above all those who have fled persecution to exercise their legal and democratic right to claim asylum in Australia.

Overcrowded and unsafe vessels attempt to sail from Indonesia and other countries to Australia only because it is virtually impossible for refugees to successfully claim asylum overseas through official channels. People will no longer drown at sea when these barriers are ended and all those refugees who want to come to Australia are provided with safe passage from South East Asia and other regions. But this is rejected out of hand by the entire political and media establishment.

To describe the crocodile tears and emotional displays in parliament yesterday as hypocritical would be an understatement.

There have been no such displays in Canberra over the numerous suicides, self-harm episodes, and epidemic of mental health breakdowns within Australia’s refugee detention centres. Nor has a single question been raised by anyone in parliament about why and how so many refugees have died in the waters between Indonesia and Australia, despite extensive Australian intelligence radar and satellite surveillance of the area as well as what is now well documented evidence that many if not all of the so-called people smuggler networks in Indonesia have been infiltrated by Australian Federal Police informants and spies. No parliamentarian has challenged what remains the official position of Australia’s Border Protection Command—that none of the police, navy or customs agencies it directs has any responsibility to rescue refugees in stricken vessels at sea.

Every disaster since the 2001 SIEV X tragedy has, in fact, been welcomed by successive Australian governments as useful deterrents to other potential asylum seekers trying to come to Australia.

After several hours of discussion and posturing in the

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House of Representatives, the assembled politicians narrowly approved "compromise" legislation drafted by government-supporting independent Rob Oakeshott that overturns a recent High Court ruling that the government's planned deportation of asylum seekers to Malaysia was unconstitutional, while also opening the door to the opposition Liberal Party's preferred dumping ground of Nauru.

Underscoring the phony character of the parliamentary debate, immediately after the vote, Labor, Liberal, and Greens MPs hobnobbed together at the annual parliamentary press gallery Midwinter Ball, a lavish event that organisers boast "brings together the journalistic, political and corporate chiefs of Australia for a memorable night of entertainment and networking."

Despite their formal opposition to the legislation, the Greens are fully implicated in all of the Labor government's moves to further subvert international law against refugees and asylum seekers. They accept the entire framework of "border protection", centred on the "right" of the Australian capitalist state to police the arrival of refugees and immigrants. The Greens remain steadfastly loyal to their agreement propping up Prime Minister Julia Gillard's minority government in parliament, notwithstanding their polite differences over so-called offshore refugee processing, and continue their unconditional support for the government's annual budgets, including its funding of the mandatory detention regime that the Greens claim to oppose.

In yesterday's debate, Greens MP for Melbourne Adam Bandt was almost apologetic as he explained that he could not support the "compromise" legislation because it involved offshore processing. He had earlier participated in an all-party parliamentarians' meeting to try to reach agreement on new laws. Bandt urged a "real regional solution" that the Greens have explained would include measures to "incentivise better intelligence and cooperation to stop people boarding boats in the first place—e.g., working with Indonesian airport, police and military".

The promotion of anti-immigrant xenophobia and national chauvinism is part of the historical stock in trade of the Australian ruling class, especially its agencies in the Labor Party and the trade unions. It is no accident that it emerges again now, amid the most severe global economic crisis since the 1930s and growing social antagonisms within Australia. The scapegoating of "foreigners" is aimed at providing a diversion from the real cause of declining living standards and growing unemployment—the profit system itself, and the austerity measures being imposed by federal and state governments alike to satisfy the insatiable demands of the financial markets.

The political establishment takes for granted the "right" of capital to roam the planet in pursuit of profit. Moreover the ultra-wealthy face no obstacle in living and doing business anywhere on the planet they wish to. Only last month the Gillard government announced new measures to fast-track the migration visa applications of anyone who can demonstrate they have a spare $5 million to invest in the country.

The working class in Australia has a responsibility to fight for the inalienable democratic right of working people and the oppressed masses of the world to live and work in whatever part of the globe they want to. Rejecting the ideology 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 to defend their common class interests by abolishing capitalism. This can only be carried forward on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective aimed at the reorganisation of economic life along socialist lines, ensuring a decent standard of living and social equality for all the world's people.

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