

Australia: Refugees stage hunger strike against removal to Nauru

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Asylum seekers detained on the Australian territory of Christmas Island staged a desperate hunger strike a week ago, after being told they would be subject to the Labor government's new anti-refugee laws and removed to the isolated South Pacific island of Nauru, where they could languish for years—if not decades.

Imayat Ali, a 51-year-old refugee on Christmas Island, told the *Age* newspaper by phone on August 24 that 238 people from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and Sri Lanka, including 40 women and children, had been informed they would be sent to Nauru, “and if we refuse...we would be deported to our home countries. So we've been doing hunger strike.”

He added: “We don't want to go [to Nauru] because we don't want to be like others before us who went to Nauru but whose cases were not quickly handled and they have to stay there for six to eight years, so they became mad. They became mentally ill. We don't want that.”

By August 26, after letters from inside the Christmas Island facility had reached refugee advocates, the Department of Immigration reported that over 100 people—including men, women and children—were refusing to eat in an attempt to prevent their removal.

A letter from a group of the asylum seekers, published by the *Australian*, stated: “Our hunger strike is on; our friends are saying that we will continue our hunger strike until we are informed that we are not going to be transferred to Nauru or Manus Island. Three of our friends have been transferred to hospital because they faced kidney illness and most of the others are getting mental and other problems.”

The government confirmed that one person had been hospitalised, but refused to disclose the cause of injury. As of last Wednesday, up to nine people remained on

hunger strike. By Thursday, officials claimed that all had been seen eating again, but there was no independent confirmation.

The refugees' desperate act of protest is the inevitable outcome of the refugee law changes announced by Prime Minister Julia Gillard last month. Refugees who arrive after August 13 will be shipped to Nauru or Manus Island, in Papua New Guinea, in violation of international refugee law, and deprived of any legal rights.

As a result, many more refugees will be forced into similarly drastic acts in the hope of gaining asylum.

More than 700 refugees have been informed that they will be sent to the islands. Refugee advocate Pamela Curr told the *World Socialist Web Site* that among them are pregnant women, small children, torture victims and at least 12 unaccompanied minors.

The Labor government responded with indifference to the hunger strike. Treasurer and Deputy Prime Minister Wayne Swan refused to comment directly on the events at Christmas Island, but said it was “very important to send a deterrence message to those who are contemplating getting on boats and risking their lives.”

Foreign Minister Bob Carr declared that he did not expect a repeat of the desperate actions taken by refugees in Australia previously, including the sewing up of their lips in protest. “I would think there's less chance of that because what we're going through now is a very transparent process.”

In fact, refugees are confronting a more draconian regime than that imposed under the previous Howard Coalition government that led to numerous instances of “self-harm”—including attempted suicides, and the sewing together of lips. By condemning asylum seekers to indefinite detention, the Labor government is ensuring

that such acts will occur.

The Labor government is preparing to violently suppress any protests against the punitive conditions. Refugee advocates have reported seeing pallets arriving at the North West point detention facility on Christmas Island containing additional batons and riot shields for police. Pamela Curr told the *Australian* that detention staff had locked down parts of the facility.

The government plans to send 500 people to Nauru before the end of September. Once the detention facilities have been completed, Nauru is expected to hold 1,500, while Manus Island will hold 600. The government last week signed a memorandum of understanding with Nauru outlining the detention arrangements. The agreement contains no limits on the number of detainees or the duration of detention.

Details continue to emerge about the inhumane living conditions that refugees will face on Nauru. The *Age*, which visited the site, being constructed by Australian military personnel, noted: “The asylum seekers will have only the most basic facilities when they arrive, including ...tents, an army cot made of canvas and steel poles and access to the local power grid, which experiences long outages several times a week. The site, called Topside and located across the road from a rock quarry and several hundred metres from the country’s only rubbish tip, is also one of the hottest sites on the island and is virtually windless. It is also home to large rats.”

The Labor government has cynically justified its harsh, punitive regime as a measure to save lives—by deterring refugees from risking drowning by attempting to reach Australia by boat. The only means for preventing such tragedies is to end the reactionary system of “border protection” and grant to asylum seekers fleeing persecution the basic right to live and work in whatever country they seek refuge.



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