

New Zealand government to take refugees from Australia's detention camps

Tom Peters
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Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard and New Zealand Prime Minister John Key unveiled an agreement on February 9 to resettle 150 asylum seekers per year from Australian detention centres to New Zealand. The New Zealand government has in effect signed to up the Australian Labor government's oppressive system of mandatory refugee detention.

The agreement was the main outcome of Gillard's visit to New Zealand. In proposing the deal as a "regional solution" to the asylum seeker "problem", Key solidarised his National Party government entirely with Canberra's persecution of refugees. In exchange, Gillard promised to help collect \$NZ600 million in outstanding student debt from New Zealanders living in Australia.

New Zealand will not increase its annual refugee intake of less than 750 people. Nor will it reduce the protracted waiting time for asylum seekers detained by Australia to be approved as refugees. The deal will also allow the New Zealand government to send asylum seekers for detention in Australia, should any arrive by boat in New Zealand—something that has never happened and is unlikely given the long and dangerous sea journey involved.

Nevertheless the government is attempting to whip up fears of a "mass arrival" of asylum seekers, which Key declared was only "a matter of time." In 2011, Key branded as "criminals" and "queue-jumpers" 85 Tamil asylum seekers on a boat stopped by the Indonesian navy while trying to reach New Zealand. Legislation currently before parliament would introduce six months' mandatory detention for groups of people arriving by boat. Immigration Minister Nathan Guy declared last September that this would "deter" people from seeing New Zealand as a "soft touch" compared to Australia.

Last year, the Gillard government revived the former Howard government's draconian "Pacific Solution", re-opening detention centres on Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island. Under the policy, thousands of asylum seekers who have arrived by boat, including children, are being held indefinitely in overcrowded, prison-like conditions.

A report by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) released this month detailed conditions at the Manus camp, where 221 people are living in tents and shipping containers, without privacy and exposed to malaria-carrying mosquitoes. The UN expressed concern for 34 children at the camp, who were suffering from mental trauma. It stated that the system of "arbitrary, indefinite detention" on the island was "unlawful" (see: "UN report details brutal conditions in Australian government's Pacific refugee camps").

In November, Amnesty International described conditions at the Nauru camp, where about 400 people are detained, as "cruel, inhuman and degrading." It found that up to 17 men were living in a single tent in unbearably hot and oppressive conditions.

The New Zealand government has dismissed these reports. Asked if he would be comfortable sending children to the camps, Prime Minister Key callously told Radio NZ that while they were "probably not [in] the greatest of conditions" Gillard had told him "they're not worse" than other refugee camps around the world.

The asylum seeker deal has provoked widespread condemnation by humanitarian groups and refugee advocates. Immigration consultant Aussie Malcolm, a former National Party immigration minister, told Radio NZ the deal was a "tragedy", which reduced "New Zealand's standing as an international citizen."

But opposition leader David Shearer refused to

pledge to reverse the policy if the Labour Party is returned to office. In 2007, the then-Labour government used the bogus threat of terrorism to rewrite immigration laws, giving government agencies increased powers to deport immigrants and limiting the rights of asylum seekers to challenge deportation. The legal change came about after the imprisonment of Algerian refugee Ahmed Zaoui for almost two years on unsubstantiated terrorism allegations.

The Australian and New Zealand Green parties postured as opponents of the asylum seeker deal, but their stance is completely hypocritical. Both parties support restrictive immigration policies. In Australia, the Greens prop up the minority Labor government and vote for its budgets, including funding for the mandatory detention regime that the party claims to oppose.

In Australia and New Zealand, the whipping up of anti-immigrant sentiment is part of a broader effort by the political establishment to divert anger over rising unemployment and attacks on working class living standards into reactionary nationalist channels.

New Zealand's opposition parties—Labour, the Greens, the Maori-nationalist Mana Party and the right-wing populist NZ First—are all complicit in this agenda. Last month Shearer attacked the government for “importing foreign labour” to work on rebuilding the earthquake-devastated city of Christchurch. Mana has also called for state-owned companies and Maori businesses to “prioritise the employment of New Zealand residents.” In fact, in January the government changed visa rules to require Christchurch employers to search for New Zealanders before hiring migrant workers.

Labour and its allies have remained silent on the government's recent decision to deport 46 Fijian bus drivers employed in Auckland and Wellington. The drivers were granted work visas in 2006 and many have raised children in New Zealand. Immigration Minister Nathan Guy told the *Dominion Post* on 1 February that since there was no longer a shortage of bus drivers “our policy is that we look for New Zealanders first for jobs, before turning to overseas workers.” The opposition parties fully agree with this discriminatory policy.

The reactionary politics of Labour, the Greens and Mana is also exposed by their political collaboration with NZ First, which has a long record of whipping up

anti-immigrant xenophobia.

On February 12, NZ First MP Richard Prosser wrote a racist tirade for *Investigate* magazine, calling for “young Muslim males” and people who “look like” Muslims to be banned from flying on “any of the West's airlines” He denounced Muslims as “misogynist troglodytes from Wogistan, threatening our way of life and security of travel in the name of their stone-age religion.” NZ First leader Winston Peters defended Prosser, saying that while his comments lacked “balance” there was “an element of truth to what he is saying.”

While Key, Shearer and other party leaders rushed to condemn Prosser's column, Labour and the Greens have refused to rule out a future coalition with NZ First. Last year both parties, along with Mana, worked with NZ First to whip up anti-Chinese sentiment over the sale of farms to a Chinese company. The Greens last month joined NZ First in blaming Chinese investors for driving up the cost of housing.



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