

Australia: Labor's nationalist jobs campaign

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Prime Minister Julia Gillard has placed a xenophobic campaign against “foreign workers” at the centre of the Labor government campaign for the election slated for September.

For months, the trade unions have been aggressively targeting 457 visa workers, immigrants on temporary visas who are brought in by corporations seeking to plug shortages of skilled workers. On March 3, Gillard backed the unions' campaign, delivering a speech in western Sydney that promised to “stop foreign workers being put at the front of the queue” and “put Aussie workers first”.

Despite coming under fire from big business, which fears that more restrictive visa regulations will trigger costly labour shortages, the prime minister has maintained the anti-foreigner rhetoric. Gillard last week declared that “community concern is there” and “when we get that kind of feedback, we should respond”.

Far from responding to “community concern”, Gillard is consciously seeking to *incite* xenophobia, as a means of diverting escalating social tensions. Amid unprecedented social inequality, the working class is under enormous pressure from rising joblessness, cost of living pressures, and substandard public infrastructure. The government is seeking to channel seething anger into reactionary channels.

The unions set the stage for Gillard's campaign with a series of protests demanding a crackdown on 457 visas. In Werribee near Melbourne, the Australian Metal Workers Union backed a small picket last month at a construction site to demand the sacking of four Filipino welders. The unions are seeking to cover up their role in working with the Labor government to enforce the sweeping economic restructuring now underway that is triggering an avalanche of job cuts and plant closures.

Over the last 18 months alone, thousands of jobs have been axed at major corporate giants such as Qantas,

Telstra, Optus, Vodafone, BlueScope Steel, Xstrata and BHP Billiton. Since the eruption of the global economic crisis in 2008, more than 130,000 jobs have been destroyed in the manufacturing sector alone. Last year, 10,000 jobs were axed in mining. While railing against 457 visas, the unions have collaborating employers in every instance in ensuring that no fight is waged by workers to defend jobs.

The government's line has been welcomed by right-wing former parliamentarian Pauline Hanson, who is notorious for her anti-immigrant diatribes. She declared that she “totally agreed” with the prime minister's statements on foreign workers and felt vindicated by the campaign.

Gillard's political career has been marked by repeated attempts to incite anti-immigrant and anti-refugee sentiment.

After the 2001 federal election—marked by the Howard government's whipping up of a vicious anti-refugee “border protection” campaign—Gillard was appointed the Labor opposition's population and immigration spokesperson. She proceeded to shift Labor policy even further to the right, attempting to reach bipartisan agreement with Howard.

In 2010, after she took office through the anti-democratic ousting of Kevin Rudd, Gillard's first announcement as prime minister included a pledge to revive a version of the Liberal's “Pacific Solution”, with asylum seekers to be illegally deported to East Timor. She has since gone even further, incarcerating refugees for years in camps on Papua New Guinea and Nauru, in defiance of international law.

The 2010 election campaign featured Gillard again attempting to whip up antagonism towards immigrants. Declaring her support for a “a sustainable Australia, not a big Australia”, in one of the televised leaders' debates, she claimed that a lower immigration intake was necessary was necessary to “protect our Australian

way of life ... that's having a job, being able to aspire to own your own home, getting decent service, health and education, having access to wide open spaces".

Facing electoral oblivion in September, Gillard is now reaching back into the political cesspit of White Australia racism on which the Australian Labor Party was founded. Labor and the unions championed the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act that restricted immigration to whites claiming it was necessary to prevent "coolie labour" from taking Australian jobs and undermining pay and conditions.

The Labor Party and the unions raised the banner of "White Australia" in response to the mass strikes of workers in the 1890s in direct opposition to those that were fighting for socialism. Gillard is doing the same today, attacking "foreign workers" in order to prevent a fight against the real source of deepening unemployment—the global crisis of capitalism.

The entire political establishment in Australia is mired in the same nationalist politics.

The Greens, who have propped up the minority Labor government since 2010, have stepped into the fray, calling for even tougher measures against foreign guest workers. Greens deputy leader Adam Bandt criticised Labor new restrictions on 457 visas as "window dressing" and demanded Gillard "bring back proper labour market testing and require jobs to be advertised locally first". Bandt's comments highlight the fact that the Greens, who posture as defenders of refugees, fully support the reactionary regime of restrictive immigration and "border protection".

The middle class pseudo-left organisations, including Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative, have similarly joined the campaign. They have rushed to lend a "left" cover to the trade unions' denunciations of workers on 457 visas, backing the various reactionary protests organised by the union bureaucracy, including the Werribee picket against Filipino welders.

Socialist Alliance's Susan Price wrote in *Green Left Weekly* that "many unions have done great job... fighting for their (457 visas workers) employment rights". She only cautioned the unions not to go too far in their anti-foreigner rhetoric, warning of the "real dangers that growing unemployment could lead to a revival of anti-migrant and racist scapegoating."

In a similar vein, Socialist Alternative's Tom Hillier

last year acknowledged that "some union leaders have capitulated to nationalist racism"—but, he emphasised, "At least there is a sense in the movement as a whole that workers deserve good, well paying jobs, and that attempts by bosses to undermine wages and conditions should be opposed".

These comments are a grotesque cover up. None of the unions has defended the rights of any workers—whether on 457 visas or not. Both Price and Hillier posture as opponents of racism and defenders of refugees, but neither opposes the reactionary framework of restrictive immigration based on the capitalist nation state.

Escalating social and economic problems stem not from immigration and a growing population, much less from refugees and asylum seekers, but are rooted in the global crisis of the capitalist economy, and the subordination of the world's people to the dictates of the profit system. Amid a deepening crisis of global capitalism, governments around the world are imposing severe austerity measures and companies are cutting costs to boost profits. This offensive cannot be resolved through "border protection" but only through the economic reorganisation of society on an international scale to replace the private profit system with a democratically planned world economy to meet human need.

The unity of workers internationally can only be forged in an intransigent struggle against all forms of nationalism and chauvinism and the defenders of capitalism who peddle this political poison. That is why the working class must champion the basic democratic right of workers to live and work in any country of their choosing, with full citizenship rights.



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