Australian opposition spokesman calls for refugees to be treated like criminals

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Liberal Party immigration spokesman Scott Morrison has taken the demonisation of refugees and immigrants to new depths. Morrison called last month for asylum seekers living in the community under the Labor government's punitive temporary visa scheme to be publicly identified, forced to report regularly to the police and placed under unspecified "behavioural protocols."

In effect, asylum seekers would be treated as dangerous criminals whose very presence threatened the public. Branding refugees and advertising where they live would not only violate their fundamental democratic and legal rights but also encourage backward anti-foreigner sentiment, media witch hunts and vigilante operations.

The Gillard government, the Greens and sections of the media have hypocritically criticised Morrison for engaging in "dogwhistle" politics designed to incite hostility toward asylum seekers. Immigration Minister Brendan O'Connor called it the "lowest form of politics." Prime Minister Julia Gillard said the Liberal opposition was "out there in the community trying to stoke fear and trying to profit from that fear."

It is the Labor government that has sought to outdo the Liberals in demonising and punishing refugees, including by transporting them to indefinite detention on Nauru or Papua New Guinea's Manus Island, and by imposing the most degrading conditions on those asylum seekers who have been allocated short-term "bridging visas" to reside outside detention centres. Gillard has also made xenophobia a central plank in her federal election campaign, declaring her government's intent to target "foreign workers" and crack down on temporary working visas.

Both parties, by trying to stoke racially based fears of refugees and foreign workers, are seeking to divert mounting discontent away from the real roots of growing unemployment and declining living standards, which lie in the capitalist profit system itself. Now that the Labor government has gone even further than the previous Howard Liberal government in consigning refugees to live in barbaric conditions on remote Pacific islands, Morrison and the Liberals are making a new bid to outflank the Labor Party from the right.

In order to advance his public branding proposal, Morrison seized upon what turned out to be misleading media reports that an asylum seeker housed in student accommodation at Sydney's Macquarie University had sexually assaulted a female student. A week later, the local police revealed that the man who allegedly committed the offence had not been housed at the university.

But Morrison used the fabricated media furore to demand the suspension of all bridging visas and the abolition of so-called "community detention." He declared that asylum seekers should not be housed near "vulnerable people." Nor should they feel "out of sight' or "out of mind."

Opposition leader Tony Abbott immediately chimed in, insisting on the "registration" of all asylum seekers—making it plain that Morrison's call will be a feature of the Liberal Party campaign for the September 14 election. One of Abbott's other shadow ministers, Eric Abetz, openly compared asylum seekers with former sex offenders, insisting that both needed to be publicly identified and monitored.

The entire affair is reminiscent of the infamous "children overboard" fabrications that overshadowed the 2001 federal election. The Howard government concocted a story that passengers on a refugee boat had thrown their children into the sea in order to force navy vessels to rescue them and bring them to Australia.

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Both Howard and Labor leader Kim Beazley went to the polls declaring their determination to ensure that "such people" would never be permitted to enter Australia. After the election, the lie was exposed: the government had falsely presented naval photographs of children in the water, taken after their boat sank, as supposed proof that refugees had deliberately endangered the lives of their own children.

Today, allegations of criminal conduct are again being utilised to vilify refugees on the eve of an election.

The Labor government bears central responsibility for the increasingly inhuman and repressive treatment of refugees, both in the detention camps and under its bridging visa regime. Those asylum seekers allowed to live temporarily in the community are denied basic civil and political rights, including to work ("Australian government intensifies anti-refugee policy"). According to the Immigration Department, they are already required to regularly report by phone or in person to departmental officials. Dependent on charity or below-poverty line welfare handouts, many are living in overcrowded conditions, with some sleeping on couches or in garages.

Like the government, the Greens criticised Morrison for "whipping up fear based on racism." At the same time, they sought to distance themselves from the government by calling for bridging visa holders to be permitted to work, to "avoid squalor." Yet, it is only with the support of the Greens, who have supplied the parliamentary numbers to sustain Gillard's minority government, that the Labor Party has been able to pursue its anti-refugee offensive. Despite their tactical differences with the government, the Greens support the underlying regime of restrictive immigration and so-called "border protection," thus ultimately defending the use of whatever means are deemed necessary to stop people freely seeking refuge or the right to live in Australia.

In order to defend the basic legal and democratic rights of asylum seekers, and reject the poisoning of the political atmosphere with the fumes of xenophobia and racism, workers and young people in Australia have to oppose the entire framework of national-based prohibitions on ordinary working people living where they choose in the world. Standing up for the rights of all people to live with full citizenship and free from persecution and intimidation is an essential component of the struggle to unify the working class globally in the fight to overturn the capitalist profit system and reconstruct society along socialist lines, for the benefit of ordinary people, not the wealthy corporate elites.

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