

Australian PM defends stripping refugees of welfare payments

Mike Head
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The Australian Labor government stepped up its persecution of refugees this week when Prime Minister Julia Gillard endorsed the stripping of all welfare payments from asylum seekers who challenge adverse refugee rulings in the courts. Gillard declared that the refugees should “go home.”

Gillard said people who had their refugee applications rejected by the immigration department and a review tribunal should leave the country. “Obviously that’s what we want people to do,” she told reporters in Brisbane on Thursday. “It’s not a question of (welfare) support for these people, it’s a question of them going back home.”

The government is trying to impoverish, and effectively remove, hundreds of refugees seeking to exercise their basic democratic and legal right to appeal to a court against the government’s refusal to grant them a protection visa.

Under the government’s refugee regime, asylum seekers who are awaiting decisions on their visa applications are compulsorily detained, often for many months. If they pass health tests, and receive a “security” clearance from the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), they may then be given temporary “bridging” visas to live in the community, but without any right to work.

Refugees banned from working receive the equivalent of 75 percent of the unemployment benefit, which itself is well below the poverty line. The “asylum seeker assistance” pittance—\$30 a day—is impossible to live on, without relying on charities and relatives.

This week, it was revealed in the media that once asylum seekers had their applications rejected by the Refugee Review Tribunal, the government cuts them off benefits altogether. Refugees are subjected to outright destitution while they wait for months,

sometimes years, for their cases to be determined by courts.

Melanie Noden, chief executive of the Asylum Seekers Centre in Sydney, told the *Australian* that about 400 of her clients were already living without welfare payments. She warned that within a couple of years, “there are going to be thousands in New South Wales alone desperately seeking support from charities like ours, which are the only agencies keeping them off the streets.”

The Asylum Seekers Centre told the WSWS that most of these clients were being threatened with return to Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran or Kurdish regions. These are all dangerous areas affected by US-led and Australian-supported military interventions or crippling economic sanctions.

Gillard replied to the media revelation by branding the asylum seekers as failed refugees who should not expect financial support. Instead, they should return to the countries they had fled, regardless of the potential risks to their lives. Her response sums up the Labor government’s hostility to refugees and indifference to their plight, as well as its contempt for fundamental democratic and legal rights.

Like the Howard government before it, the Labor government has been intent on barring asylum seekers from access to the courts. A decade ago, the Howard government passed laws—with Labor’s backing—to block all refugee appeals, only to have the High Court rule, in 2003, that any such ban would be unconstitutional.

Now the Gillard government is trying, by backdoor and underhanded means, to achieve the same end. It is effectively thumbing its nose at a further High Court ruling, issued in November 2010, that rejected asylum seekers have the right to appeal to the courts. That

ruling showed that the government's review process was seriously legally flawed and denied basic procedural fairness.

Cutting asylum seekers off welfare is a measure designed to forcibly repatriate refugees who have protection claims to put before the courts. It is also reinforces the government's draconian measures to deter refugees from trying to reach Australia in the first place. Labor is flouting international law, including the Refugee Convention, which recognises a right to flee oppression and forbids its signatories from refouling (deporting) people to face the danger of persecution.

Last year, the government imposed a "no advantage" system, which condemns refugees to indefinite detention, or prolonged unemployment and deprivation on bridging visas. People who have arrived by boat since last August—17,000 so far—will not be granted protection visas any quicker than if they were languishing in a refugee camp somewhere else around the world. In addition, only 20,000 visas will be granted each year. Refugees, even if deemed eligible for a visa, could wait for years.

Immigration Minister Brendan O'Connor this week announced that entire families, not just single men, would be subjected to detention within Australia, as well as the "no work" bridging visa system. He foreshadowed the opening of designated family zones inside detention centres at Wickham Point, near Darwin, and the remote Curtin air base in northwestern Australia.

O'Connor made it clear that this new policy was deliberately harsh, in order to reinforce the "no advantage" regime of deterring refugees. He also boasted that the government had, over the past five months, deported more than 1,100 asylum seekers to Sri Lanka after "screening" them out of the visa application process—that is, they were prevented from even seeking asylum.

Even the government's own Human Rights Commission has timidly suggested that Australia may be breaching the international Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that children should be detained only as a "last resort." Commission president, Professor Gillian Triggs, expressed "serious concerns," adding: "Curtin, in particular, is remote, isolated, in a very harsh environment and is no place for children."

There is absolute bipartisan unity within the political

establishment on this anti-refugee drive. Labor and the Liberal-National opposition are vying with each other to whip up xenophobic sentiment against asylum seekers as the impact of the deepening global economic breakdown since 2008 is increasingly felt in Australia, producing rising unemployment and social distress. They are being aided and abetted by the Greens, who criticise aspects of the refugee system and propose token amendments, but continue to prop up the Gillard government.

The Socialist Equality Party is the only party that stands unequivocally for the fundamental democratic right of asylum seekers, and all working people, to live and work where they choose, with full civil and political rights. This stand is essential for the fight to unify the working class across Asia and globally in the common struggle against the outmoded and oppressive capitalist system.

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