

# Australia: Labor government foreshadows even harsher anti-refugee measures

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Since his sudden reinstallation as prime minister last week, Kevin Rudd has already made clear that among his highest priorities is even harsher measures designed to prevent desperate asylum seekers reaching Australia by boat from Indonesia and other parts of Asia.

Amid a clamor in the media, especially the Murdoch press, against rising numbers of boat arrivals, Rudd is seeking to outdo Liberal leader Tony Abbott, who has campaigned for the past three years on a reactionary pledge to “Stop the boats.”

During his first press conference as Labor leader, Rudd endorsed the inflammatory comments of Foreign Minister Bob Carr, who accused newly-arrived asylum seekers of fleeing for economic reasons, not to escape persecution. Rudd declared: “A whole bunch of people who seek to come to this country are economic migrants.”

By branding refugees as “economic migrants”, the Labor government is preparing to exclude entire categories of people from claiming asylum under the already narrow definition of the 1951 Refugee Convention. Its purpose is to scapegoat refugees for the worsening social crisis produced by the government’s own anti-working class policies.

Carr’s claim that there have “been some boats where 100 percent of them have been people who are fleeing countries where ... their motivation is altogether economic” has no basis in fact. The refugee status of some 22,000 asylum seekers who have arrived since last August, when the government froze all asylum applications, has simply not been assessed.

Carr dismissed objections from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and Australian Human Rights Commission president Gillian Triggs, who referred to the fact that, on average, 90 percent of asylum seekers have been classified as “genuine

refugees.” Carr insisted that this only proved that the tribunals were failing to take a “hard-headed enough” approach.

“My department is going to produce some hard-edged assessments,” Carr stated. He foreshadowed plans to issue guidelines, specifying that Iran, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and possibly other countries were “safe” for asylum seekers to return, regardless of their individual circumstances.

Such guidelines would amount to direct political interference in the deliberations of tribunals and courts, placing pressure on them to ignore UN evidence, along with their obligations to adhere to the Refugee Convention, which forbids returning refugees to countries where they face the risk of persecution.

Immigration Minister Tony Burke indicated this morning that the processing of refugees would be restarted. While he did not announce changes to the assessment procedures, Burke emphasised there would be no “quick pathway” to the issuing of visas.

The Rudd government’s determination to shut the door to refugees underscores the hypocrisy of the entire political establishment. Even as it backs Washington in fomenting sectarian warfare in Syria and seeking to overturn the government in Iran, it is intent on denying protection to the innocent victims of these predatory operations.

Rudd arrives in Indonesia today for talks with Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono on trade, as well as measures to prevent refugee boats sailing from Indonesia. The Australian Federal Police already operates closely with Indonesian authorities to try to disrupt the departure of boats bound for Australia.

According to media reports, the discussions will focus on stepped up police and intelligence operations

against refugees. Rudd will apparently also seek an end to the granting of Indonesian visas to Iranians and citizens of other countries considered “at risk” of seeking asylum in Australia.

The federal election, due within months, is rapidly turning into a reactionary bidding war between the government and opposition on so-called “boat people.” Opposition leader Abbott has targeted Rudd’s abandonment, in his first term of office, of the former Howard Liberal government’s “Pacific Solution” of placing refugees in indefinite detention on remote Pacific islands.

During his 2007 election campaign, Rudd sought to exploit widespread public revulsion toward the Howard government’s refugee policies. The Liberals’ barbaric record, marked by mass drownings, detainee suicides, hunger strikes and mental health breakdowns, was a significant factor in Labor’s substantial electoral victory.

Within a year, however, the Rudd government began to reinstate the basic features of Howard’s policy. This included the opening of a huge detention centre on Christmas Island, in the Indian Ocean, to deal with growing numbers of refugees in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis, which had compounded the ongoing exoduses caused by the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Later, the massacres of Tamil civilians in Sri Lanka, and the US-backed conflicts in Syria, Mali and Somalia, swelled numbers further.

Immediately upon ousting Rudd as prime minister in a backroom coup in mid-2010, Julia Gillard immediately sought to whip up anti-refugee hysteria, vowing to halt the refugee boats, including by establishing new detention camps in East Timor and Malaysia. When these projects failed to materialise, Labor re-opened the “Pacific Solution” camps in Nauru and Papua New Guinea. Then it excised the entire Australian continent from the country’s own migration zone, in an effort to strip asylum seekers of virtually all legal rights, and imposed a “no advantage” rule. Under this rule, refugees have been forced to wait as long—potentially many years—as they would have in overseas refugee camps, effectively consigning thousands of people, including women and children, to prolonged detention and legal limbo.

Under Gillard, the Labor government cynically claimed that its efforts to stop refugees arriving in

Australia were driven by a humanitarian desire to prevent them from losing their lives on dangerous journeys. In reality, its policies have been directly responsible for the ever-worsening toll—at least 1,000 drownings since 2007—both by blocking safe entry to asylum seekers and by repeatedly failing to mount effective search and rescue operations.

In 2010, in the midst of Gillard’s leadership putsch, Rudd publicly warned the Labor Party not to “lurch to the right” on immigration policy. Last week, as reported in the *Australian* by Senator Glenn Sterle, Rudd told the Labor caucus that he would not “lurch to the left”—in other words that he would implement even tougher anti-refugee measures, while retaining the central elements of Gillard’s policies.

No details have yet been released. According to various media reports, however, the new provisions could include new deportation arrangements as well as cutting off the right to work for asylum seekers who try to challenge denials of their refugee status in the courts, in order to force them to leave Australia.

The Labor government’s assault on refugees is a warning to the working class as a whole. It indicates the kinds of anti-democratic measures that will be used to suppress growing resistance to its program of intensifying militarism and austerity.

Workers and youth must reject the xenophobic campaign being waged by the government and opposition alike, and defend the basic democratic right of all asylum seekers and refugees, and all workers, regardless of their nationality, religion or colour, to live and work in Australia, or any country they choose, with full legal, democratic and citizenship rights.



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