

Australian Labor government announces shutting of borders to refugees

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In a policy of unprecedented brutality and lawlessness, the Australian Labor government headed by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has declared that no asylum seekers arriving by boat in Australian waters will ever be permitted to settle in the country. Instead, they will be transported to primitive detention camps in Papua New Guinea—one of the world’s most impoverished countries. Even if officially assessed as refugees, they will be forced to remain in PNG, in what has aptly been described as “hell hole” conditions.

So mosquito-infested and lacking in basic health and other necessary facilities is PNG’s remote detention facility on equatorial Manus Island that women and children were evacuated from it several weeks ago. Now, Rudd’s government has declared, it will be immediately expanded in capacity from 600 to 3,000 detainees. In fact, no limit has been set on the number of asylum seekers to be sent there, or how long they will be remain.

The vast majority of PNG’s population lives in poverty, with one-third struggling to survive on less than \$1.25 a day. The country ranks 156th on the UN human development list and cannot provide for its own refugees from Indonesia Papua, let alone those being dumped by Australia.

Rudd’s measures amount to a far-reaching assault on one of the most fundamental legal and democratic rights—the right to flee repression and seek asylum from persecution, without punishment or discrimination. The measures violate the international Refugee Convention, which enshrines these rights, together with core rights to freedom from arbitrary detention and other human rights abuses, the provision of essential health and education facilities, and access to the courts by refugees to challenge their treatment.

Further, Rudd’s regime flies directly in the face of a 2011 Australian High Court decision that declared illegal the Labor government’s previous “Malaysian

solution”—devised by Rudd’s predecessor Julia Gillard—to transport refugees to Malaysia, where these basic rights were also denied. But Rudd’s policy goes even beyond Gillard’s, by permanently consigning its victims to live in PNG without legal rights, proper services or decent living conditions.

Some of the most vulnerable people in the world, mostly fleeing the ravages of the wars and devastation caused by the US and its allies, including Australia, in the Middle East, are bearing the brunt of a blatant repudiation of basic legal and democratic rights. Not since the ports of the US and Cuba were closed to Jews fleeing Nazi persecution in 1939, has such a blanket ban on refugees been imposed.

According to refugee law experts, no other advanced country has formally shut its borders in this fashion, not even in Europe, where governments are taking increasingly draconian steps to push refugees back to other countries. Like the Keating Labor government, which became the first in the world to impose mandatory detention on asylum seekers in 1992, this Labor government is spearheading an assault without precedent on one of the most defenceless sections of the international working class.

Rudd also announced a \$200,000 bounty, supposedly on the heads of “people smugglers”. The money will be paid to anyone providing information that leads to an arrest and charges of people smuggling, which carry a jail term of up to 20 years. These offences are defined so broadly that they cover the families, friends or supporters of asylum seekers who in any way assist or encourage them to try and sail to Australia. Cash bounties in the past have been offered to those who help exterminate pests, such as cane toads in Australia’s north. Now they are being offered to anyone informing on those assisting refugees.

In another assault on the rights of refugees, the Rudd government last week issued directives to its Refugee

Review Tribunals to deny refugee status to asylum seekers already in Australia from countries classified by the Department of Foreign Affairs as “safe”. Such directives make a mockery of the independence of the tribunals and also effectively override the Refugee Convention, which requires asylum seekers to be considered on the individual merits of their case.

There is no doubt that the PNG government of Prime Minister Peter O’Neill was bullied and bribed into the Rudd government’s scheme. In doing so, he has ridden roughshod over concerns within PNG about the inhuman treatment of refugees, and the precedent being set by their arbitrary detention. O’Neill, who was undemocratically and illegally installed as prime minister in 2011-12, with the backing of both Canberra and Washington, has sought to placate this opposition by claiming that PNG will benefit economically to the tune of “hundreds of millions of kina” from the deal. Any benefits will flow to business operators, and Australian contractors, not the ordinary people of PNG, as long experience of Australian “aid” throughout the Pacific region can attest.

Just as Rudd was announcing his plan, the horrific conditions being endured by the inmates of Australia’s offshore incarceration facilities were highlighted when the 550 refugees, dumped by Canberra on the Pacific island of Nauru, rioted against their indefinite detention, burning down most of the camp. More than 125 detainees have been jailed as a result.

Australian Foreign Minister Bob Carr is heading to the Solomon Islands, another impoverished Pacific nation, to demand a similar “agreement” with that government. And Rudd and Carr have already prevailed on the Indonesian government to halt the granting of visas to any Iranians who arrive in Indonesia, potentially heading for Australia.

Rudd is now preparing to rush to an election on the basis of these reactionary policies. His government is spending an estimated \$1 million a day on ads in all the daily newspapers and other media declaring: “If you come here by boat without a visa YOU WON’T BE SETTLED IN AUSTRALIA.” In doing so, he is seeking to outflank opposition leader Tony Abbott’s slogan, “stop the boats,” by an even more inhumane policy. In response, Abbott has declared his agreement with the fundamentals of Rudd’s scheme.

Nominal Labor “left” convenor Doug Cameron has swung behind the policy, as has virtually every other Labor MP. Likewise, the media establishment, with the so-called “liberal” *Sydney Morning Herald* editorializing today: “The Papua New Guinea solution can be a

humane, fair and cost-effective way of deterring boat people from risking their lives.” The line-up behind Rudd testifies to the lack of any support in ruling circles for even the most essential legal and democratic rights.

To claim that this “solution” is aimed at preventing refugees from drowning at sea is an utter fraud. More than 1,000 refugees have died trying to reach Australia under the Labor government since 2007 solely because successive Labor and Liberal governments have erected ever greater barriers to prevent them from seeking asylum. Likewise, the argument that stopping boats will give greater opportunities to other desperate families waiting in refugee camps throughout the region is a lie. Tens of millions of people remain trapped in these camps, in Iraq, Jordan, Pakistan and eastern Africa, because of the refusal of governments around the world to allow them entry.

The Greens’ public objections to Rudd’s policy should be regarded with contempt. They bear full responsibility for maintaining the minority Labor government in office throughout the past three years as it has escalated its anti-refugee assault. Moreover, they subscribe to the underlying framework of the immigration controls and “border protection” regime established by both major parties, aimed at denying the democratic right of all people, including refugees, to live and work, with full citizenship rights, in whatever country they choose.

The working class as a whole must take a warning from Rudd’s ruthless assault on asylum seekers. It amounts to a pledge to the corporate and financial elites that there is no line his government will not cross to impose their demands for austerity and cost-cutting amid the deepening global economic crisis. While refugees, the weakest and most oppressed layers of society, are the immediate target, the real goal is the destruction of the democratic and social rights of the entire working class.



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