Australian Greens fraudulently posture as defenders of refugees

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Demonstrations in Australia's main cities last weekend opposed Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's anti-democratic policy of consigning all refugees arriving by boat to economically underdeveloped and impoverished Papua New Guinea.

Workers, students and youth expressed outrage at the brutal treatment of people fleeing oppression and poverty. But the organisers used the demonstrations to provide the Greens with a platform to fraudulently posture as humanitarian defenders of refugees.

Up to 3,000 people attended the rally in Sydney, 5,000 in Melbourne, and several hundred joined demonstrations in Perth, Adelaide, Brisbane and Canberra.

The Greens' federal leader Christine Milne was the main speaker at the protest in Perth that was organised by the Refugee Rights Action Network WA and attended by about 400 people. Other speakers included a Hazara community representative, who outlined the persecution confronting refugees fleeing Afghanistan, a National Tertiary Education Union delegate, and church leaders.

Milne's address demagogically denounced the Labor and Liberal parties and presented the Greens as champions of refugee rights. Her remarks were couched in nationalist terms. She complained that the policies of Rudd, and opposition leader Tony Abbott, were an affront to national pride, which she said was based on "a fair go" and "compassion." Milne was in effect pleading for the two traditional ruling parties to adopt a more humane façade, lest the brutal character of the government's policy damage the standing of Australian capitalism on the world arena.

"We are very strong as a nation," Milne declared. "When we have been struck by hard times, whether it's been war or oppression, we have stood together." This appeal for national unity was a veiled reference to the widespread alienation of masses of people from the political establishment, and a warning to the rest of the political and corporate elite that the blatant attacks on the democratic rights of refugees threaten to deepen this hostility.

The Greens' criticisms of aspects of Labor Party policy are entirely hypocritical, and are aimed at covering up their own complicity in every measure enacted by the Labor government.

The Greens have been unwavering in supporting the minority Labor government, and played a key role in its formation following the 2010 election, which delivered the first hung parliament in seven decades. The Greens held firm to the Labor alliance in 2011 when then-Prime Minister Julia Gillard struck a deal to forcefully transport asylum seekers to Malaysia, a move that the High Court blocked on the grounds that it contravened international law. The following year, the Greens continued to support the Gillard government when it re-established the detention of refugees on Papua New Guinea's Manus Island and Nauru in the South Pacific.

Earlier this year, concerned that they would be entirely discredited by their de facto coalition with Labor, the Greens announced that they were exiting from the alliance. They pledged, however, to ensure parliamentary stability, and uphold "confidence and supply"—in other words, to continue propping up the Labor government.

At Saturday's rally, Milne was silent on the Greens' record, and none of the demonstration's organisers were so impolite as to mention it.

Milne's speech included a favourable reference to the Houston panel, headed by former military chief, Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, which the Labor government convened last year with the aim of shifting

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refugee policy further to the right. Milne called on the government to follow the panel's recommendation that Australia marginally increase its intake of refugees from Indonesia, as part of a "regional solution."

The Greens, no less than the Labor and Liberal parties, defend the existing framework of "border security," which includes the mandatory incarceration of asylum seekers. The Greens merely want this regime to be implemented with a "humane" mask. Their claims to oppose the attacks on the democratic rights of refugees are a cynical attempt to garner electoral support, and trap workers and young people, opposed to the bipartisan agenda being carried out by the major parties, within the worm-eaten framework of the official political set-up.

Milne's denunciations of Rudd and Abbott notwithstanding, the Greens have signalled their willingness to work closely with whichever party forms the next government, whether Labor or Liberal.

The Socialist Equality Party alone insists on the fundamental democratic right of all people to live and work wherever they choose, with full citizenship rights. This is a key component of the SEP's socialist and internationalist program. At a series of election meetings held over the weekend, SEP candidates explained that Rudd's blatant attack on the basic legal and democratic rights of refugees is a warning that regardless of which party takes office following the federal election, it will carry out a sweeping assault on the democratic and social rights of the working class as a whole.

WSWS reporters spoke to workers and young people at the Perth demonstration. One young woman explained: "I'm a refugee myself. My family came to Australia after the coup in Chile in 1973, so obviously I believe in supporting others. I think it's quite disgusting what Kevin Rudd has done, so I wanted to come and defend refugees."

Asked why she thought Rudd had outlined his new policy, she commented: "It's a political stunt to divert attention away from the major issues. I've noticed that every time there's an election coming up, the refugee question is always being raised. Refugees are used as a scapegoat to stop a discussion of the concerns that the majority actually want to talk about, like unemployment. In Perth there is rising homelessness. There are lots of issues that the majority wants to talk about."

Andrew, a small business owner, said: "Rudd's policy has confused me. The problem I see is that refugees don't have a 'queue' to join. They don't have an 'orderly' means of coming here. They're running for their lives. I would do the same if I were in their situation. Papua New Guinea is not a reasonable alternative for refugees; it's a joke. The whole discussion about refugees is used to suck the oxygen out of other important issues, and it never gets a compassionate treatment."

Pointing to the broader class issues raised by the plight of refugees, Andrew noted: "We've had a few decades of neo-liberal policy, which has removed national borders from markets and trade, but we haven't had the breakdown of borders to people movement. The effect of the breakdown of these barriers to trade is that a lot of people in developing countries have been further impoverished, but they are blocked from leaving by these national boundaries. I think there could be a link between profit interests and the situation facing refugees."

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