

Australian political parties step up anti-refugee campaign

Patrick O'Connor
2 August 2013

The unofficial election campaign underway in Australia remains dominated by a lawless campaign waged by the major establishment parties against refugees.

After returning to office in June, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd announced the establishment of a vast new detention system in the impoverished Pacific country of Papua New Guinea (PNG). It will hold an indefinite number of asylum seekers who arrive by sea, who will be denied any possibility of settlement in Australia.

The policy is without precedent internationally and flagrantly flouts the 1951 Refugee Convention, to which Australia is a signatory. International law enshrines the right to flee persecution and explicitly prohibits discrimination against asylum seekers based on the means through which they enter another country.

The government on Wednesday and yesterday deported the first groups of asylum seekers to PNG's Manus Island since Rudd negotiated the so-called Regional Settlement Agreement with Canberra's lackey in Port Moresby, Prime Minister Peter O'Neill. A total of 79 men were forcibly marched out of the detention centre on Christmas Island, in the Indian Ocean, and onto planes amid a heavy Australian Federal Police presence.

Government officials videotaped the illegal deportation and posted it on the Internet, as part of an expensive campaign involving constant advertisements on commercial radio and in every major newspaper in Australia. This is being cynically justified on the basis of "saving lives" by deterring further asylum vessels from attempting the dangerous voyage.

The government has no concern whatsoever for the wellbeing of asylum seekers. In fact, its policies are designed to deter others from coming to Australia by deliberately destroying the lives of the refugees who have already arrived. Labor's PNG gulag will quickly generate a wave of mental breakdowns and acts of desperation, including suicides, as occurred during the former Howard

government's "Pacific Solution" of incarcerating refugees on Manus Island and the Pacific island state of Nauru between 2001 and 2007. Moreover, there is substantial evidence that Australian officials have deliberately stood down Border Protection and military rescue personnel to allow refugee drownings to occur. (See: "Australian government's culpability in refugee boat disaster")

The Labor government has sought to outflank the opposition Liberal Party from the right on asylum policy. Opposition leader Tony Abbott late last month pledged to appoint a military commander in charge of refugee policy, a move that would bypass the statutory chain of command and mark a further expansion of the anti-democratic domestic use of the military. Earlier this week, Abbott and his immigration spokesman Scott Morrison also announced a plan to construct a 2,000-person "tent city" on Nauru to hold refugees deported from Australia, with the capacity potentially increased to 5,000.

Morrison made the initial announcement from Nauru. It later emerged that he had his trip paid for by Toll Holdings, a major logistics company that has multi-million dollar contracts for managing asylum seekers and stands to reap further profits through the construction of a "tent city." Toll also paid for the accompanying trip by a journalist and photographer from Murdoch's News Limited, with journalists from other media outlets not invited.

The incident pointed to the influence of important sections of business on the major parties' "border protection" policies, with virtually every aspect of refugees' detention, within Australia and in the Pacific, subcontracted to private corporations.

The government denounced the Nauru proposal for not being sufficiently punitive. Immigration Minister Tony Burke declared that the tent proposal "makes sense" and "is no different to what we have been flagging." But he

attacked the Liberals for failing to go as far as the government in blocking the possibility of refugees ever being settled in Australia. Burke also condemned the 5,000-person limit for the potential camp, declaring that only uncapped deportations would deter asylum seekers.

The bipartisan unity on the reactionary “border protection” drive is aimed at inciting the most backward nationalist and xenophobic sentiments, while creating a massive political diversion from the real issues confronting the working class. Irrespective of whether Labor or Liberal wins the upcoming election, the government will unleash a series of pro-business economic restructuring measures and sweeping austerity spending cuts, targeting basic social programs, including health, education and welfare. At the same time, these parties are marching in lockstep with the Obama administration’s aggressive confrontation of China, which threatens to trigger a devastating region-wide war.

None of these issues is being openly discussed by the political and media establishment.

The Greens are playing a crucial role in this political conspiracy. They are posturing as opponents of the major parties’ brutal refugee policies, in order to contain the widespread disgust and anger over the issue felt by millions of ordinary people, especially the youth, within the existing parliamentary setup.

The Greens helped lay the political groundwork for the current refugee policies, by working for three years in a de facto coalition partnership with the minority Labor government of ex-Prime Minister Julia Gillard. The Greens stood loyally behind Gillard as she reinstated Howard’s “Pacific Solution,” adding the even more punitive “no advantage” test under which even officially recognised refugees are illegally detained for many years, supposedly equivalent to the length of time spent by asylum seekers in processing camps in the Middle East and Africa. As part of their deal with Gillard, the Greens also voted for every one of the government’s budgets, including the provisions funding the running of Australian and Pacific detention centres.

Greens’ leader Christine Milne now calls for a “humane” approach to asylum seekers—but the party’s alternative policies are premised on maintaining the basic “border protection” regime from which the anti-democratic measures of the major parties flow.

The Greens call for a meagre quota increase of just 10,000 UNHCR-processed refugees a year, to 30,000. These figures include accepting 3,800 refugees from Indonesia, which the Greens have stressed was a measure

recommended by the so-called expert panel appointed by Gillard and headed by former air force chief Angus Houston. The 2012 Houston report concocted the “no advantage” rule and recommended the deportation of refugees to the Pacific and South East Asia. Yet, revealingly, the Greens seek to justify their own proposals within the framework of this report.

The Greens advocate closing detention centres in the Pacific—but not in Australia. Under their policies, the Australian facilities would be used to detain adults for months while they are being processed, which includes undergoing Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) assessments. This highly dubious intelligence checking, concluded in secret and largely on the basis of information provided by the countries that the asylum seekers are fleeing, has especially targeted Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka. The Greens endorse the process, pledging only to allow for “fair legal review and community detention options” for those given adverse security assessments.

The main purpose of Australia’s detention centre network, under the Greens’ policies, would continue to be to expel asylum seekers. As soon as the Greens’ annual quota of refugees into Australia was filled, deportations would follow.

The working class must fight in defence of the democratic right of people to move anywhere in the world, with full political and civil rights. While the government and its accomplices are seeking to whip up xenophobia and promote national divisions, working people share common class interests with the refugees. They have the same basic needs and aspirations as those seeking to escape oppression and exploitation worldwide—decent living standards, social services, democratic rights and social equality. All this can be realised only through an internationally unified struggle of the working class against the profit system and its destructive division of the world into rival nation states.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact