

Australia: Greens, pseudo-lefts suppress class issues at refugee rallies

Our correspondents
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Further protests were held last weekend in major Australian cities against the Labor government's blanket denial of the right of asylum to refugees travelling to Australia and to send them to the impoverished Pacific countries of Papua New Guinea and Nauru.

On Friday evening, close to 1,500 people rallied in the centre of Melbourne. Hundreds attended demonstrations on Saturday in Perth and Adelaide. On Sunday, up to 3,000 people took part in a rally and march in Sydney. Students and youth, outraged by the sheer brutality of Labor's policies, which have been endorsed by the opposition Liberal-National coalition, made up a significant proportion of the protests.

Members of Afghanistan's persecuted Hazara community who have been granted refugee status and citizenship in Australia spoke at several rallies, denouncing claims by Labor politicians that large numbers of so-called "boat people" are not genuine refugees.

However, the main political feature of the rallies was the manner in which the Australian Greens and the pseudo-left organisations, Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative, obscured the class issues. No reference was made to the way in which Labor and the Liberal-National opposition, aided by the media, are whipping up xenophobia over asylum seekers to drown out any discussion of the sharply deteriorating economic conditions and their own preparations for intensified restructuring and cutbacks to social spending after the election.

In that context, Labor's stripping away of the rights of refugees is a signal to the banks and major corporations that, if returned to power, it will trample on the democratic rights of the working class as it implements its austerity agenda.

The Greens, who have propped up the minority Labor government for the past three years, have already

signalled their willingness to enter a similar arrangement in the future with either major party. Their criticism of the inhumane treatment of refugees amount to a cynical attempt to channel the hostility toward Labor and Liberal back into a vote for the Greens and their parliamentary manoeuvres, or holding more protests.

In Sydney, Cate Faehrmann, the Green Senate candidate in New South Wales, promoted the false hope that protests could pressure the major parties to adopt a more humanitarian policy. "We need to make politicians' lives miserable about this policy. Labor, Liberal and National MPs [members of parliament] who refuse to speak out for what is right need to feel the heat... Until they feel the heat, they will not move. So that is your job, and our job to continue doing this," she declared.

The Greens' own policy simply puts a more humane façade on the present reactionary "border protection" regime. The Greens agree with the basic premise behind the persecution of refugees—the maintenance of border controls and limits on the number of people who can enter and live in Australia. As more and more people seek to escape the catastrophic conditions created by Australian-backed US military operations and provocations in the Middle East and Central Asia, the inexorable logic of the Greens' positions is the mass detention of asylum seekers, whether in camps in Indonesia, mainland Australia or elsewhere.

Members of the Socialist Equality Party campaigned among workers and students at the rallies in Sydney, Perth and Melbourne for the democratic right of all people to move and live anywhere in the world, with full political and civil rights. In every part of the world, xenophobia and nationalism are being promoted to channel the social discontent of the working class away from a political struggle against the cause of the economic crisis and growing militarism and war—the capitalist system itself.

WSWS correspondents interviewed a number of people

attending.

Peter, attending in Sydney, said: “What the Rudd government is doing is terribly unjust. It’s criminal, contrary to international law and it’s immoral. Basically, I think Rudd is using this as a platform on which to get re-elected, because Rudd thinks that the majority of people are xenophobic racists. I think it’s going to backfire on him. To put refugees on Manus Island in PNG is a joke. I mean, they haven’t got enough resources to look after their own people. Where are the refugees going to get jobs in PNG? Where are they going to get social services?”

“You can’t palm refugees off on a third world country. I was an asylum seeker. Fifty five years ago we fled persecution in Czechoslovakia and if it wasn’t for ‘people smugglers’, I wouldn’t be here today.”

Billy, a 15-year-old student, said: “I think that all people should be treated equally. Why should we in Australia be using our smartphones, sleeping in our comfortable beds, when they are on boats fleeing and then we say ‘no you can’t come here.’ It’s putting us above them, which is wrong. You can’t solve the refugee crisis unless you abolish poverty. But you can resolve the deaths by letting them come on safer modes of transport. I think that it’s awful that the Labor Party has been forced over to the right just by so-called polling that says everyone’s scared of refugees.”

Kiano, who is originally from West Africa, took part in the Sydney rally. He said: “The government says it’s a free country, so they should let the refugees in. They are leaving their own country because something bad is going on there. They come here to make a new life, a better life. The governments helped create wars and then they don’t let the people in.

Debbie, a teacher attending the rally in Perth, said: “Labor and Liberal are trying to outdo each other to show how tough they can be in the region. The PNG solution is not a humane option. I have seen reports that to set up Manus Island they have to partially close a school, which disrupts the people there. To accommodate a detention centre will cause problems in a country that has problems of its own. Australia is supposed to be a neighbour that helps poorer countries and yet Australia hasn’t developed Papua New Guinea. It’s like colonialism at its worst.

“I encourage my students to be critical thinkers and to think about the rights of asylum seekers and not just to be influenced by the media. I say to students look at the media, which pushes false ideas. I believe all asylum seekers should be given asylum.”

Michael Rees-Lightfoot, came to the Melbourne rally

from the nearby RMIT university: “I support the rights of the refugees. I am totally opposed to the new policy. Refugees have the right to seek asylum in any country. These people are leaving terrible conditions. The reason the government is making this such a huge issue is because they want to win the election. I feel like all I can do in this election is vote for the Greens because I just can’t vote for either Labor or the Liberals.

“I know that the Greens say they will accept 30,000 refugees. At least that’s something and hopefully in the future we will let unlimited numbers of refugees settle here. I agree that refugees should be allowed to live and study anywhere in the world. The bottom line is that it is not illegal to seek asylum.”

Adam, a student at Victoria University in Melbourne, told WSWS reporters he was on his way home from work when he saw the demonstration. “I would have felt like a fraud if I didn’t join in,” he said. “This goes against international law in all senses. It doesn’t seem to even come on the agenda that Australia is a signatory to various conventions. It’s really disgraceful. A lot of the time, the things happening to these refugees are the result of the economic policies and war from developed countries, and they’re the fallout. For the government to ignore them is the most despicable thing we could do.”

Adam said: “I’ll be voting for the Greens in the next election. I was thinking of voting for Labor, but I was surprised to see these horrible policies, so I’m not going to vote for them.”

After a WSWS reporter commented on the role of the Greens in supporting the minority Labor government, Adam replied: “I’m certainly not defending the Greens. I’m disillusioned with the political system altogether to be honest. A couple times I didn’t bother even voting because I thought, well, ‘what’s the point’? It is a bit of an indictment of our political system, but it is how everyone feels.”



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