

Australian refugee camp atrocity: The class issues

Patrick O'Connor
14 March 2014

Last month's suppression of a protest staged by refugees locked up in Australia's refugee camp on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea (PNG) is a sharp warning of the violent, police-state measures being prepared by the ruling class. The brutal methods being used against vulnerable and desperate people seeking asylum from persecution will be used more broadly against workers as they fight to defend their basic rights.

An official cover up of what happened in the Manus camp is underway, but multiple witness accounts have provided a consistent outline of the events of February 17–18. After earlier bolstering the security detail at the camp, authorities organised a mass meeting of the 1,300 detainees to inform them that they would never be permitted to settle in Australia or a third country. With the PNG government refusing to guarantee resettlement, this left the prospect of permanent incarceration in the Manus camp, or a return to the country from which they were fleeing.

Not surprisingly, the meeting triggered an angry protest. Australian security officials employed by British-based transnational security giant G4S called in the Australian-funded PNG police mobile squad, a notoriously violent paramilitary unit. Police stormed the area, firing live rounds, apparently joined by local security guards and thugs armed with machetes who ransacked the camp and attacked asylum seekers. Many detainees were seriously injured, including one suffering a gunshot wound. Reza Berati, a 23-year-old Iranian Kurd, who hoped to work as an architect in Australia, died after being reportedly kicked and stomped in the head.

The incident bears all the hallmarks of a calculated provocation orchestrated by the Australian government in a bid to reinforce its regime of mandatory, indefinite

detention of refugees in breach of fundamental democratic rights and international law. The death and injuries are crimes, for which Prime Minister Tony Abbott and Immigration and Border Protection Minister Scott Morrison bear responsibility.

Morrison, who initially issued a bald-faced lie that no violence had occurred within the detention centre, blamed the refugees for their plight—clearly indicating that any further protests would be met with similar violence. The incident was also meant as a “deterrent” to others thinking about seeking asylum in Australia. Abbott backed Morrison as a “strong” minister, declaring that he did not “want a wimp running border protection.”

The entire political establishment is responsible for the prison camp on Manus Island and the underlying regime of incarcerating refugees. The former Greens-backed Labor government reopened the detention centre in 2012, as part of range of measures that went far beyond what the earlier Liberal PM John Howard called the “Pacific Solution.”

The Abbott government has taken up where Labor left off. The Greens are now seeking to capitalise on the violent crackdown on Manus Island to posture as opponents of the Liberals. They uphold, however, the reactionary premise of the “border protection” regime, namely that the capitalist state can and should use whatever force is required to restrict and police the movement of people between nation states.

The brutal methods developed to prevent any challenge to “Fortress Australia” are part of far broader police-state mechanisms to suppress social unrest and political opposition at home. Having declared a “national emergency on our borders,” the Abbott government has called in the military to lead a lawless and secretive regime to suppress any protest by people

whose only “crime” is to flee persecution. Similar treatment will be meted out within Australian borders to anyone else, above all working people, who threatens the interests of the ultra-wealthy elite.

Amid a worsening global economic crisis, the ruling class is acutely conscious of the potential for unrest and opposition to suddenly erupt in unexpected forms. Since 2011, the working class has begun to resist the deep inroads being made into living standards. Revolutionary upheavals, mass strikes and protests have emerged in many countries, including Egypt and Greece.

The full force of the worldwide downturn is hitting the Australian economy, which was somewhat sheltered initially by the mineral export boom. Following on from the previous Greens-backed Labor government, the Abbott government is orchestrating a sweeping assault on the social position of the working class. It is working with big business and the trade unions to systematically destroy entire sections of industry—most notably the car industry—eliminating hundreds of thousands of jobs. At the same time, it is preparing to make far-reaching cutbacks to public health care, education, welfare payments and services, and other social infrastructure.

The measures implemented by successive governments have already produced a profound gulf between rich and poor. Australia’s 50 wealthiest individuals have an estimated collective fortune of \$US102 billion—49 percent more than just three years ago. On the other side of the social chasm, the latest Australian Council of Social Services report reveals that two million people, or 12.8 percent of the population, are living below the poverty line.

The ruling class and its political representatives are well aware that the deepening class divide will produce social unrest and are preparing accordingly. Under the fraudulent banner of the “war on terror,” Labor and Liberal governments alike have over the past 15 years erected the legal and organisational scaffolding for a police state, including beefing up the internal secret police, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), which now has powers to detain without charge and conduct secret interrogations. The call-out powers of the military have been boosted to allow their intervention to suppress unrest.

The working class must also prepare. The class

interests of Australian workers are the same as those of workers everywhere, including those fleeing persecution, violence and poverty. The working class must defend the basic rights of the asylum seekers locked up on Manus Island and other camps in Nauru and within Australia, by championing the fundamental right of people everywhere to travel, to live and to work anywhere in the world, with full citizenship rights.

The fight for this principle is a crucial component in uniting and mobilising the international working class in a political struggle to abolish the capitalist system, which offers workers and young people nothing but further attacks on democratic rights, militarism and war, and economic hardship.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact