

Oppose Australia's handover of refugees to Sri Lankan navy

The Socialist Equality Parties of Sri Lanka and Australia
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The Socialist Equality Parties of Sri Lanka and Australia unequivocally condemn the forced transfer of Sri Lankan asylum seekers by the Australian government back into the hands of the very forces—the Sri Lankan military and government—whose violence and repression they have fled.

We call on the working people in both countries and internationally to oppose this brutal joint military operation in the Indian Ocean. So far, about 200 refugees—men, women and children—are reported to have been illegally detained on the high seas, interrogated on board Australian “border protection” vessels and either handed over to the Sri Lankan navy, or transported to be handed over.

Already, 41 asylum seekers have been shipped back to Sri Lanka and detained in the hands of the police Criminal Investigation Division, which is notorious for its abuse of prisoners. According to the Sri Lankan authorities, 37 of the forced returnees are Sinhalese, which only underscores the fact that not just Tamils but Sinhalese workers and their families are now fleeing the regime.

This entire operation is a blatant violation of the fundamental legal and democratic rights of asylum seekers and of international law, including the conventions on refugees and torture. After being cloaked in military secrecy and official coverup for two weeks, the first handover on the high seas has now been confirmed by senior ministers from both governments.

Working hand in glove, the two governments are setting a new global precedent for the direct rendering, or refoulement, of persecuted people into the arms of their persecutors. It recalls the infamous voyage of the *St Louis* in 1939, when 937 Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution in Europe were refused entry to both Cuba and the United States and were returned to Belgium, which was shortly to be occupied by Nazi forces.

Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott's cynical claim that Sri Lanka is now “safe” for the return of refugees is a bald-faced lie. Abbott is well aware of the reality. Last November, during a visit to the country, he effectively endorsed the use of torture by the Sri Lankan authorities.

“[W]e accept that sometimes in difficult circumstances difficult things happen,” he told journalists (see: “Australian PM defends torture, hails Sri Lankan regime”).

Since the bloody defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009, the end of the protracted war conducted by successive Sri Lankan governments has only led to an intensification of the repression against Tamils, and the wider imposition of police-state measures to suppress the struggles of the Sri Lankan working class against President Mahinda Rajapakse's pro-business and austerity program.

Striking workers and protesters have been fatally shot by soldiers or police. Working people live in fear of forced abductions in white vans, torture and extrajudicial killings, land seizures by the military, assassinations of journalists and oppression of political opponents. The UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances ranks Sri Lanka, with 12,000 recorded since 1980, as second only to Iraq for the number of civilian disappearances.

Since March, a renewed crackdown by the Rajapakse government, on the unsubstantiated pretext of combating a LTTE “revival,” has sent a fresh wave of people fleeing to southern India, where more than 100,000 Sri Lankan refugees already languish, and from where the latest intercepted boats sailed.

Refugees captured by the Sri Lankan authorities can be jailed for two years for trying to leave the country without permission. There is a proven record—also documented by international human rights agencies—of returnees being interrogated, beaten, tortured and disappeared at the hands of the police and the military.

A common political thread runs through the activities of both governments. Increasingly, they are resorting to military methods, as well as the whipping up of communalism and xenophobia, to divert rising social unrest under the deepening impact of the economic breakdown that erupted in 2008.

In Sri Lanka, the Rajapakse government is fomenting a new anti-Tamil scare campaign and backing Sinhala Buddhist chauvinist groups in waging violent attacks on

Muslims, in a drive to set sections of the working class against each other.

In Australia, the Abbott government, following in the footsteps of the previous Greens-backed Labor minority government, is scapegoating Sri Lankan and other refugees to try to derail mounting popular hostility to massive job losses and deepening cuts to education, health, welfare and other basic social programs.

“Stopping the boats”—that is, preventing all refugees from setting foot in Australia, has become bipartisan policy. It was spearheaded by the Labor government’s forced removal of all asylum seekers to hell hole camps in Nauru and Papua New Guinea, where they are detained indefinitely and told they will never be permitted to enter Australia.

Abbott’s government is directly building on Labor’s record of initiating, in 2012, military cooperation, training, intelligence-sharing and additional resources to boost the Sri Lankan navy. Labor removed more than 1,000 asylum seekers en masse back to Colombo, after they were arbitrarily “screened out” of the refugee application process. Now these “enhanced screening” interrogations are being conducted with refugees unlawfully incarcerated on board Australian customs vessels—effectively prison ships.

A broader geo-strategic agenda is also driving Canberra’s collaboration with Colombo. Sri Lanka sits adjacent to the shipping lanes across the Indian Ocean, on which China depends, in particular, for its access to oil and other raw materials. Enhanced military collaboration with Sri Lanka gives the Australian government, a key ally of the US, greater penetration of the Indian Ocean, under the cover of monitoring and intercepting refugee boats.

The Obama administration, as part of its military and strategic “pivot” to the Indo-Pacific to confront China, is intent on pulling Rajapakse away from his close relations with Beijing, which provided crucial support to the Colombo government during the war, and continues to supply investment and foreign aid.

In this push, the US has feigned concern for “human rights” in Sri Lanka, calling for an international inquiry into the killings and abuses perpetrated by the Sri Lankan military in the final months of the war in 2009, while remaining silent on the crimes being committed against the refugees fleeing the ongoing repression.

Around the world, the number of refugees, internally displaced people and asylum-seekers reached an unprecedented 51.2 million by the end of 2013, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. During 2013, the toll rose by 6 million, largely as a result of the escalation of the US-backed Islamist regime-change operation in Syria and the ongoing catastrophes produced by the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

The rising tide of people seeking refuge is also driven by deepening social and economic inequality, highlighted by Oxfam’s report in January that the world’s richest 85 people control as much wealth as the bottom 50 percent of the world’s population—3.5 billion people.

Despite this colossal concentration of wealth in the hands of a few, governments all over the world are increasingly shutting their doors to refugees on the grounds that economic resources are limited. The same governments give free rein to the movement of global capital, while denying the basic democratic right of millions of its victims to live and work, with full civil and political rights, where they choose.

The incitement of anti-refugee prejudice is bound up with the promotion of nationalism and chauvinism to pit workers in each country against the others, as the contradictions of global capitalism once again pose the danger of another world war for control over resources and markets.

Those fleeing Sri Lanka and other areas of the world devastated by the wars, civil wars, ethnic conflicts and famines produced by the capitalist profit system have the same basic needs and aspirations as workers everywhere—decent living standards, social services, democratic rights and social equality.

The defence of asylum seekers—some of the most vulnerable members of the world working class—is an indispensable part of the fight to unify the struggles of the working class and put an end to the root of the social crisis—the irrational and war-mongering private profit system itself.



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