

Australia sets precedent for worldwide assault on refugees

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With sickening hypocrisy, Western governments are spearheading a drive to shut national borders and resort to military methods to repel the growing numbers of people trying to escape war and oppression—all in the name of “saving lives.”

From Europe’s Mediterranean Sea to the waters of South East Asia, naval warships are hunting down thousands of desperate refugees. Many are being pushed out to sea to starve or drown. Others are being directly forced back to the places they are fleeing or incarcerated in squalid camps.

Under the banner of “humanitarian” concern to prevent deaths at sea, governments in Europe and Asia are emulating the use of the military pioneered in Australia more than a decade ago to deny refugees the basic right to seek asylum.

The present Liberal National Coalition government is flaunting its role as a world leader in the callous and inhumane treatment of asylum seekers. Foreign Minister Julie Bishop last week declared she had received “numerous requests” from European officials to discuss Australia’s “border protection” policies.

Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott publicly urged European and Asian governments to follow his government’s example by mobilising their armed forces to drive boats away.

Last Sunday, amid an international outcry over the fate of Rohingya and Bangladeshi refugees repelled by Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, Abbott declared: “I don’t apologise in any way for the action that Australia has taken to preserve safety at sea by turning boats around where necessary. And if other countries choose to do that, frankly that is almost certainly absolutely necessary if the scourge of people smuggling is to be beaten.”

The anti-refugee policy did not start with Abbott.

Successive Australian governments have led the way in taking ever-harsher measures to bar access to asylum seekers. The Hawke and Keating Labor governments of the 1980s and 1990s imposed the world’s first “mandatory detention” regime—the indefinite imprisonment of all refugees arriving by boat.

In 2001, the Howard Liberal-National government, backed by the Labor opposition, deployed SAS commandos to deny entry to 433 refugees rescued by the Tampa, a Norwegian container ship, and transported them to the remote island of Nauru. This inaugurated the unprecedented “Pacific Solution” of consigning asylum seekers to concentration camps on remote islands.

Six weeks later, came another historic turning point, when the Howard government allowed 353 refugees headed toward Australia aboard a boat dubbed SIEV X to drown without a rescue bid being launched. It then brazenly seized on their deaths to insist that no refugees should try to reach Australia.

In 2012, the Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard signalled a sweeping new offensive. It concocted the slogan of “saving lives,” now being adopted around the world, to sanctify overturning the fundamental democratic right, recognised by international law, to flee persecution.

After being blocked by Australia’s High Court from dumping refugees in Malaysia, Gillard’s government commissioned a former Australian military chief, Angus Houston, to head an “expert panel” to draft a new policy. As a result, Labor not only reopened offshore detention camps, but declared that refugees would be incarcerated for many years as a “disincentive.”

This was a flagrant repudiation of the post-World War II international Refugee Convention, which bans

the punishment of asylum seekers and prohibits governments from refouling (removing) them to face the danger of persecution.

Conscious of the widespread sympathy among ordinary working people for refugees, Gillard claimed that the measures were necessary to stop drownings at sea. “I would say to those people who were motivated by humanitarian concerns, now very, very squarely in front of us we’ve got another humanitarian concern. And that humanitarian concern is more people are trying to reach Australia by boat and more people are drowning as they do it ... It requires us to do things that are really hard.”

This was a patent fraud. Like Howard’s government, the Labor government failed to organise a number of boat rescues and cynically exploited the resulting deaths to try to deter refugees from sailing to Australia.

Labor’s “humanitarian” rationale nevertheless provided a vehicle for erstwhile liberal political commentators, academics and journalists to “rethink” their past, limited, objections to the detention regime. Self-described public intellectual, Robert Manne, once a critic of the “Pacific Solution,” declared that “for all Australians with an interest in the wellbeing of asylum seekers,” deaths at sea demanded “policy re-evaluation.” Prolonged detention on barren islands was now essential as a “deterrent” to refugees.

The Greens, while maintaining that they had not dropped their opposition to mandatory detention, insisted they would still support the minority Labor government, which relied upon their votes to remain in office. They gave credence to Houston’s report by welcoming his “humanitarian” call to lift Australia’s annual refugee intake to 20,000—a drop in the ocean compared to the global need.

The underlying realignment has become the consensus throughout Australia’s political and media establishment. Barely a word of criticism is heard of the sham “humanitarian” façade, let alone the underlying reactionary framework of “border protection.”

In this atmosphere, Monday’s *Australian* editorial welcomed as “common sense” the European Union’s adoption of a military campaign to stop refugees crossing the Mediterranean. It proclaimed: “Eradicating people-smuggling should be a core tenet of international refugee and immigration policy.

Australia’s experience has shown lives will be saved through a determined, consistent approach.”

Eliminating “people-smuggling” means denying the basic right to seek refuge. In reality, it is the shutting of all borders that forces asylum seekers to depend on so-called people smugglers to try to escape unbearable conditions.

Far from lives being saved, thousands of the world’s most vulnerable people are perishing on the high seas after taking dangerous voyages to try to evade border controls and military patrols. Millions more remain trapped in ghettos or tent cities, facing war, violent attacks, social catastrophe and bloody repression.

Around the world, governments scapegoat immigrants and refugees to divert attention from their own responsibility, and that of the profit system, for rising unemployment and poverty. While the poor, the vulnerable and the persecuted are barred entry, the world’s wealthy face no obstacle in living and doing business anywhere on the planet.

Asylum seeker deaths at sea can be halted only by providing refugees with safe passage and recognising their basic democratic right to live and work in any country of their choosing, with full citizenship rights.

The struggle for that policy is the responsibility of the working class worldwide. It is an essential component of an internationalist perspective aimed at the reorganisation of economic life globally along socialist lines, ensuring a decent standard of living and social equality for all the world’s people.



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