

The callous and criminal treatment of refugees

James Cogan
17 June 2015

It is now apparent, despite the refusal of the Australian government to confirm or deny the allegations, that Australian authorities paid the crew of a refugee boat to take 65 asylum seekers back to Indonesia against their will.

Liberal and Labor governments alike have justified their policy of denying refugees the right under international law to claim asylum in Australia on the grounds that it “saves lives,” by discouraging them from paying “criminal people-smugglers” to transport them on unseaworthy vessels. Refugees are regularly intercepted and condemned to indefinite detention in prison camps on remote Pacific islands, or, “turned back” to “send a message” to future asylum seekers.

The latest incident is a graphic demonstration of the lies and criminality at the heart of Australia’s brutal “border protection” regime.

Evidence compiled by Indonesian police indicates the boat was intercepted by Australian customs in international waters to the north of Australia around May 17. Upon ascertaining that its destination was New Zealand, Australian authorities left the vessel to its fate, regardless of its condition and whether or not it involved “people-smuggling.”

Four or five days later, the boat was re-intercepted by an Australian customs and naval ship. This time, supposedly because it was “unseaworthy,” the vessel was towed for four days to Greenhill Island, off northern Australia. The 65 passengers could not, however, apply for refugee status due to reactionary laws enacted by the former Labor government, which excised the entire Australian continent from Australia’s migration zone—an act without precedent anywhere in the world.

The refugees were then taken back out to sea and transferred onto two small wooden boats, provided by

the Australian government, and stocked with limited fuel and supplies. The crew were paid between \$US5,000 and \$6,000 each to head back to Rote Island, west of Indonesian West Timor.

One boat ran out of fuel. With 71 people crammed aboard, the remaining vessel crashed onto reefs. Refugees were forced to swim for up to 90 minutes to reach the small Landu island, where the alert was raised and a rescue operation organised.

The only reason anything is known about the incident is that the refugees managed, against all the odds, to survive. Everything points to a conscious plan by Australian authorities to ensure that they did not, in fact, live to tell the tale. The police chief of West Timor, General Endang, bluntly described their journey as a “suicide mission.”

There is absolutely no reason to believe this incident is an isolated one. How many other refugees have been forced by Australian authorities onto vessels with inadequate supplies, with crews paid to “turn them back,” and then abandon them on the high seas? How many have not reached shore? The government’s stated policy is to release no information about the cost—in lives or money—of any of the secretive military operations it conducts to persecute refugees.

The entire political establishment is implicated in these crimes. Payments to so-called “people-smuggler” syndicates in Indonesia have been a feature of the “border protection” regime under Liberal and Labor governments since as far back as 2001. While denouncing so-called “people smugglers” as “criminal scum” and “human filth,” Australian authorities have no compunction about paying them to assist in denying refugees their fundamental democratic rights.

The hypocrisy of the Australian establishment is boundless. The government and mass media

fraudulently denounce China as a threat to “freedom of navigation” in the South China Sea and threaten to join a US-led military confrontation over the issue. When it comes to the waters north of the Australian continent, however, the government engages in what is tantamount to piracy to seize refugee boats.

Australia’s “border protection” policies have become a model for similar measures against asylum seekers by the European powers in the Mediterranean, by the United States, and by South East Asian countries in response to the recent crisis involving thousands of Bangladeshi and Rohingya refugees trapped at sea.

An Amnesty International report published this week concluded that the world is facing the most serious refugee crisis since the mass displacement of millions during World War II. Well over 50 million people have been uprooted by wars, civil wars, economic collapse and political chaos over the past 15 years—much of it directly caused by US imperialism and its allies, including Australia. Those risking everything to seek sanctuary in Australia have largely come from Afghanistan, Iraq and the war-ravaged Tamil-minority region of Sri Lanka.

The reactionary nature of capitalism and the nation-state system is nowhere revealed more graphically than in the horrific predicament facing refugees. Under conditions of an intractable global economic crisis and mounting social antagonisms, the whipping up of anti-immigrant xenophobia has become the stock-in-trade of politicians around the globe to justify ever-deepening attacks on the democratic and social rights of the entire working class.

Millions of people in America live under the constant fear of being deemed “illegal,” while Washington justifies neo-colonial operations in Central and South America on the grounds of stopping more migrants entering the US or, elsewhere, under the pretext of “protecting” refugees. The European powers are drawing up plans for the military occupation of their former colonies in North and Central Africa under the guise of concerns about stopping desperate people risking their lives crossing the Mediterranean.

In Australia, there is a direct relationship between the persecution of refugees and the country’s participation in the US-led neo-colonial operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, waged since 2001 under the fraudulent banner of the “war on terrorism.” The demonisation of

refugees, including as “terrorists,” has been used to justify the casting aside of international laws and conventions, as well as to divert growing popular frustration and anger over escalating economic and social crises.

As the US and Australia have built up their military posture against China in Asia, “border protection” has become the convenient pretext for the surveillance and militarisation of the waters approaching critical sea lanes through Indonesia, such as the Lombok and Sunda Straits. In the event of war with Beijing, US and Australian strategy would see the current operations against refugees seamlessly escalated into a naval blockade aimed at strangling China’s economy.

The working class internationally must take a stark warning from the daily violations of international law meted out against refugees. They demonstrate that the ruling classes everywhere are prepared to trample over the democratic rights of the world’s most vulnerable and desperate people and will not hesitate to use ever more ruthless methods to suppress domestic political opposition to social inequality, austerity and war.

The fight to defend the fundamental democratic right of every person to live and work in the country of their choice, with full rights of citizenship, is inseparable from the struggle for the political independence and international unity of the working class on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program against the capitalist profit system itself.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)