Rallies in Europe and Australia in defence of refugees

Our reporters
14 September 2015

Demonstrations in defence of refugees Saturday saw tens of thousands turn out in the UK, Germany, Austria, France, Spain, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands and Portugal. Thousands of people also took part in rallies in Australian cities on Friday and Saturday.

Up to 100,000 people protested in London, with smaller rallies held in towns and cities including Bristol, Newcastle, Manchester, York, Brighton, Belfast, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Cardiff.

Around 30,000 marched in the Danish capital Copenhagen.

More than 20,000 demonstrated in Hamburg and several thousand in Berlin. Four hundred people rallied in Padborg on the German border, a transit point for many refugees entering the country.

In France, protests were held in Nice, Metz, Lyon and Avignon.

An estimated 1,000 people joined a rally in the Swedish capital Stockholm.

In London, the "Solidarity with Refugees" event was called by a number of organizations, including the Refugee Council, Refugee Action, Stand Up To Racism and Amnesty International. Those attending demanded refugees be allowed entry to the UK and protested the anti-refugee policies being carried out by the UK's Conservative government.

The march gathered near Hyde Park, marched past the prime ministers' Downing Street residence and concluded with a rally in Parliament Square.

In recent weeks, support has mounted in Britain in defence of the rights of refugees, with more than 380,000 people signing an online petition demanding that the UK government "must accept its fair share of refugees seeking safety in Europe."

The *Independent*noted that the march was the "biggest national show of support for refugees in living memory."

At the head of the demonstration was a large banner proclaiming "Refugees Welcome Here." This sentiment was represented on many of the homemade banners that people brought with them.

Some of these read, "No Human is Illegal," "I Believe in Human Rights, Open the Borders" and "Refugees In." Protesters chanted slogans in defence of refugees including, "Say it proud, say it clear, refugees are welcome here."

Those in attendance included entire families. A sizable proportion of the demonstration consisted of young people and students with delegations attending from student organizations, including those at the London School of Economics and University College London.

Idiana came to the demonstration with her friend Olidia. Idiana said, "I've just come back from abroad and … the British government is perceived internationally as a massive xenophobic government."

She added, "I'm embarrassed by the situation. We're marching today and we're marching with refugees." She said they were attending the protest "to stand in solidarity with other people whose bodies are committed to a very different experience than our own."

Asked about what her family and friends thought about the issue, Idiana said, "They're really concerned about this rise of xenophobic approach. I can't describe it any other way. It really reminds you of the Holocaust; describing people as like 'swarms.'"

Charles attended the demonstration with his son Gabriella and Casper, a friend of his son. Charles said, "I came to this country at the age of three with my parents from Sri Lanka as refugees, we sought refuge in the UK as did many of my parents' friends and family. As a consequence, my sister and I grew up in safety and received all the benefits of living in a progressive society. We were escaping a civil war conflict."

Asked why he was attending, Charles replied, "We are just showing solidarity with other refugees and from the experience I have. It's a common shared experience across the UK."

Charles stated his opposition to the government's decision to take in just 20,000 refugees over five years:

"I think we arrived at a time when there was far more compassion. There was a great level of acceptance. The government now is quite the opposite. They are making political points around immigration and are scare mongering, when actually we have more than sufficient resources in comparison to the late 1970s when I arrived. My family and I were given refuge at a police station. We were taken in by the police! Could you imagine that now?"

Asked his opinion of the British governments plans to carry out air strikes in Syria, Charles said, "There are people fleeing a conflict and to exasperate the conflict is clearly going to make it far worse. I have seen people go on to be professionals and work in the justice system as a consequence of them being given refuge. The addition of refugees into any given society far outweighs any negative images that have been painted in the minds of people."

Ellany, a student in London said, "I'm originally from Greece, so it's like I can see history repeating. With our population in Greece, many times we've had to leave our homes. We were forced to leave Greece so it is important for people to be safe. The politicians have to understand the reason why people are coming. They can't really complain about it.

"The people already in the UK should not suffer and nobody should suffer. The ones who will have their lives changed will be the people coming here and that should not be a problem. It shouldn't be seen as a problem."

Asked about the tiny number of refugees that the UK government will allow into Britain, Ellany said, "It's not a lot at all. We cannot

© World Socialist Web Site

see refugees as mere numbers. They are people and they should not be counted. It is very wrong. They have lives, they have children and they have to have the right to leave and come here."

Asked if she was aware that at some European borders, refugees have had numbers marked on their arms by the authorities, she replied, "It brings memories back of the Nazis. You don't want that to be repeated. We should learn from history so we don't repeat the same mistakes. That sounds quite bad what they are doing."

In Hamburg, more than 20,000 people took to the streets on Saturday to demonstrate their opposition to racism and fascism and to express solidarity with refugees.

Support for refugees is overwhelming in the city. According to a recent poll, 94 percent of the population in Hamburg "welcome living with people of different origins in their districts."

In recent weeks, thousands of refugees have arrived in Hamburg and are housed in 90 makeshift shelters. There have been repeated protests by refugees and doctors against the poor hygienic situation and lack of adequate medical treatment that refugees face.

Some 1,000 refugees live in crammed conditions in the trade fair halls at the port.

Leading up to the event, the authorities banned a march, to be held the same day by far-right forces.

Anti-fascist protesters who gathered in the city were met with a massive police presence. Almost 3,000 officers in full riot gear, complete with mobile tear gas canisters on their backs, were mobilized, and equipped with water cannons, armoured vehicles and horses. During the day Hamburg's main rail station was blocked by the police for hours stopping all trains.

The majority of protesters, around 14,000, attended a demonstration at the main station. Half as many, around 7,000 attended the official event organized by the political establishment, including the Social Democratic Party, the Greens, Christian Democratic Union, as well as the Hamburg Chamber of Commerce and the Federation of German Trade Unions.

In Australia, about 4,000 people attended a rally and candlelight vigil in central Brisbane at the Roma Street amphitheatre on Friday night. They were mainly young, with many young families with children. Smaller protests took place on Saturday involving several hundred people in Sydney and Melbourne following much larger demonstrations in those two cities and other cities and regional centres last Monday.

The outpouring of support for refugees in Europe and other parts of the world is particularly significant given the role of successive Labor and Liberal governments in imposing draconian restrictions on asylum seekers, including the bipartisan "turn back the boats" policy and indefinite incarceration of refugees on isolated Pacific islands. All the major parties including the Greens, which propped up the previous minority Labor government, are responsible.

At the Brisbane rally, banners and placards not only demanded the entry of greater numbers of refugees from Europe but expressed opposition to the detention of refugees in Nauru Papua New Guinea's Manus Island. The hand-painted signs included: "Free the refugees," "Seeking asylum is LEGAL, Refugees are not criminals, Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," and "Let them come, let them stay, we are strong enough."

At all three rallies, the organisers sought to steer the outrage and opposition back into the parliamentary framework, inviting MPs from Labor, the Greens and, in Brisbane, the Liberal Party to posture as defenders of refugees.

Nicole, a university student, who came to the Sydney rally with her friend Morgan, told the WSWS: "The reason I am here at this rally is that if I do nothing I feel complicit. All of this is happening in our name. People need solidarity, the whole world is deepening in inequality and this is just one side effect of this strong right-wing conservative movement in all the Western world.

"I feel that mainstream society has become extreme and refugees are dehumanised by the political elite and by the media. I think that the images that have been coming out have just broken through that wall of dehumanisation and people are now actually seeing what it looks like and they are horrified."

Asked about the government's decision to take part in the US-led bombing in Syria, she replied: "I think it is a really complex situation. I think the concentration needs to be on aid. I think the international community has to be taking refugees and has an opportunity to act as global citizens, not just bombing the problems away. Bombing alone creates more refugees, so if we have people on the ground you could have a genuine effort to help people."

Jan explained: "I have a concern about the way that Australia is treating refugees and asylum seekers. Even though I know and acknowledge the extra 12,000 that we are accommodating, it is still nowhere near what we should be up to by this stage. They [the government] cut back [the refugee quota] from 20,000 to 13,000 and they have done that consistently.

"I have a concern about the fact that they are saying that they will prioritise women and children and families. For me that is code for saying that they will not accept young men, they will not accept boys.

"The irony is that people like me have the freedom to go anywhere I want to in the world. It is only people of a certain race or nationality who do not have that freedom. I think we need to look at that very clearly.

"I feel ashamed of the role of the Greens and the Labor Party. I have been a Labor voter all my life and I would not vote for a party that said it would turn the boats back. I reacted very strongly against that. It is a race to the bottom."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site