

Australia: Thousands protest High Court ruling upholding offshore refugee detention

Our reporters
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Thousands of people attended demonstrations across Australia on Thursday, opposing Wednesday's High Court ruling sanctioning the bipartisan government-Labor Party regime of indefinitely detaining refugees in virtual concentration camps on Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island.

The supreme court's decision clears the way for the removal back to Nauru of 267 people, including 72 children, who have been in Australia for medical treatment, and opens the door legally for Australian governments to make wider use of "offshore" detention.

Around 5,000 people attended the demonstration in Melbourne, while some 400 rallied in Sydney. Protests were also held in Adelaide and Canberra, as well as regional centres including Newcastle and Bendigo. Further rallies are planned around the country in the coming days.

The attendance at the events expresses the mass revulsion among ordinary people toward the brutal treatment of asylum seekers fleeing war and persecution, who are subjected to detention that doctors and other medical personnel have said amounts to torture. At the Sydney and Melbourne protests, former detainees delivered impassioned denunciations of the court ruling.

However the political perspective advanced by the protest organisers, including various pseudo-left groups, was to appeal to the very forces responsible for the persecution of the refugees—the Liberal-National government of prime minister Malcolm Turnbull and the Labor Party.

The Sydney rally was chaired by Ian Rintoul, a Refugee Action Coalition spokesman and leading member of the pseudo-left Solidarity organisation. He said the task was to "push Turnbull back on this issue,"

i.e., apply pressure to the conservative Coalition government to change its policy.

Rintoul claimed there were "voices in the Labor Party" opposing offshore detention, adding: "We need Tanya Plibersek and Anthony Albanese."

In reality, Plibersek and Albanese were senior ministers in the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments that reintroduced offshore detention, reopening the Manus Island and Nauru camps in 2012. They were instrumental in imposing the brutal regime that the High Court approved, which was specifically designed to punish refugees for trying to reach Australia by boat.

Labor's current posturing, hypocritically proposing "better treatment" of detainees, is aimed at deflecting attention from its establishment of the traumatising conditions in the detention facilities, including the abuse of women and children, that have resulted in widespread public anger.

In both Sydney and Melbourne, the Greens were provided with a platform to posture as defenders of refugees. Mehreen Faruqi, a Greens MP in the New South Wales Legislative Council, denounced offshore detention as "cruel and inhumane." She noted that Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition came together last year, amending the Migration Act to seek to strip refugees of legal rights to challenge their treatment.

Faruqi, however, did not mention the role of the Greens in propping up the minority Labor government from 2010 to 2013 as it carried out a host of anti-refugee policies, including the reopening of the Nauru and Manus hellholes. Nor did Alex Bhathal, the Greens candidate for federal seat of Batman, who spoke in Melbourne.

The Greens, like Labor and the Coalitions, support the entire nationalist framework of border protection, visas and passports that underlies the measures to block

young people and workers from seeking asylum. Their differences are purely tactical—reflected in the comments of a number of the speakers in Sydney that the brutality of offshore detention is “bad for Australia’s image overseas.”

None of the speakers at either rally opposed Australia’s direct participation in 15 years of US-led wars in the Middle East, including the current bombing campaign in Syria and Iraq. Their silence on these military adventures—which have created millions of refugees—underscores their essential agreement with the predatory wars conducted by successive Australian governments.

Above all, the aim of the main speakers was to prevent the oppression of refugees becoming a focal point for a broader movement of workers, students and young people in opposition to the entire political establishment, and to channel their disgust back into the parliamentary apparatus. In Sydney, Julie Macken, a former Greens “Communications Coordinator” and longtime journalist at the *Australian Financial Review*, said the way to end the persecution of asylum seekers was to “vote for the Greens” at this year’s federal election.

Organisers also promoted futile stunts, with the same basic political perspective. In Melbourne, protesters were urged to stage a “sit-in” outside the Liberal Party’s state headquarters.

Reporters from the WSWS spoke to a number of participants in the Melbourne rally.

Rocel, an aged-care worker, commented: “This is like history repeating itself. The refugees now are like what happened with the Jewish people. Other countries pretended they would help the Jews escape from the Nazis, but the Jewish people were fooled. The other countries wouldn’t help them.

“I am from the Philippines. They are trying to put American soldiers all over the place there. They are the reason why terrorism is happening—they instigated it. They use the ‘war on terror’ so people will hate each other. It creates oppression, poverty, war and refugees.”

Uzma, who came to Australia from Pakistan, said: “This is not humanistic. The governments all around the world don’t care about refugees. It is happening globally.

“All the powerful countries have a hand in creating the chaos in these countries where the refugees come

from. They created it. The most unfortunate part is that there is not a single institution internationally on which you can rely for an honest opinion.

“Look at NATO forces in Pakistan, in Asia. They create chaos. They say it is the people and refugees who are dangerous. No, it is the governments and the profit-based policies that are dangerous.

“It is not just refugees. For the common person in Melbourne, Australia, it is surely not as easy to live as it was two years ago. ‘The world’s most liveable city!’ It sounds funny to me.”

John, a public sector worker, said: “My father was a refugee from the former Yugoslavia, because of the war. He had to go to Greece for two or three years, then to Italy, and finally to come to Australia as a refugee.

“Look at Europe today. Firstly, war is creating a whole lot of refugees. Europe is capitalising on war. We are the intelligent human race, we should be able to find a resolution for some of these societies. It is insane. For the last 10-15 years there have been a number of wars exploding all over the globe.”



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