

Hundreds of refugees in Australia face return to offshore camps

Max Newman
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Despite protests around the country, asylum seekers who were brought to Australia for medical treatment after being detained in the Australian-run “offshore processing” facilities on Nauru and Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island face being sent back to these oppressive camps.

The Liberal-National Coalition government remains determined to remove the 267 refugees, including 91 children—37 of whom are babies—in order to enforce the bipartisan policy of blocking entry to Australia of all refugees who arrive by boat.

In order to deter people from trying to reach Australia, the prison camps on Nauru and Manus are deliberately punitive. A recent medical study concluded that the conditions of indefinite detention—itsself a denial of fundamental legal and democratic rights—are so severe that they amount to torture.

Moreover, the detention centres have no facilities to treat a wide range of medical conditions, including childbirth and the endemic mental health problems caused by the prolonged incarceration.

The camps were initially established as part of the Howard Coalition government’s post-2001 “Pacific Solution,” designed to consign all asylum seekers to remote islands. They were reopened by the last Labor government in 2012, which vowed to “stop the boats” again by detaining refugees in the camps for as long as they would have waited for official permission to enter Australia—which could mean 20 years.

A recent High Court decision to legally rubberstamp indefinite detention on these islands cleared the way for the removal of the 267 refugees. They include a 5-year-old child who was allegedly sexually assaulted, a baby who has type 1 diabetes and at least 15 women who claim to have been assaulted or harassed in the camps.

Among them is a one-year-old infant, known publicly

as Baby Asha, and her family. She was born in Australia after her parents were flown from Nauru for her birth last June, only for the family to be transported back to Nauru after she was born.

On January 26, Baby Asha was returned to the Lady Cilento Children’s Hospital in Brisbane, Queensland after receiving a scalding injury to her chest. She had pulled recently boiled water onto herself from a table. On Nauru, with no access to clean water, Baby Asha’s mother had to boil water to ensure it was safe to drink.

After the High Court decision, staff at the hospital refused to discharge Baby Asha. They said a return to Nauru would be detrimental to her health and wellbeing. Their stand attracted widespread support, resulting in a 10-day protest outside the hospital demanding that Baby Asha and her family not to be returned to Nauru and that other refugees be allowed to remain in Australia.

On February 22, Immigration Minister Peter Dutton said he had come to an “agreement” with the hospital for Baby Asha and her family to be released into “community detention.” In the early hours of the morning, security guards removed the baby to an undisclosed location. Her parents were not informed of her whereabouts until the afternoon.

“Community detention” is an alternative form of confinement developed by the previous Labor government to subject thousands of refugees, while permitted to remain temporarily within Australia, to drastic restrictions on their movement and basic legal, welfare and work rights.

Dutton denied that his decision not to immediately send Baby Asha and her parents back to Nauru was affected by the protests. This was what the government had “proposed all along,” he insisted, and the baby and the other refugees ultimately would be returned to the

camps. “[A]t some point, if people have matters finalised in Australia, they will be returning to Nauru,” Dutton stated.

Yet the temporary reprieve was heralded as a victory by various online protest groups, the Greens and the pseudo-left organisations, Socialist Alternative, Socialist Alliance and Solidarity, that had channeled the outrage over Baby Asha’s plight into a social media “Let Them Stay” campaign. An article in Socialist Alliance’s *Green Left Weekly* declared that Dutton’s decision “shows the power of the people.”

The article referred to a “bipartisan policy of mandatory detention”—but ignored the role of the Greens, who provided the 2010-2013 minority Labor government with the parliamentary support to remain in office as it reinstated the “Pacific Solution.” While the Greens criticise aspects of the anti-refugee regime, they support the entire underlying system of “national border protection.” They advocate dumping refugees in “assessment” centres in impoverished South East Asian countries.

“Let Them Stay” is designed to funnel the public opposition to the inhuman treatment of refugees back behind the same parliamentary parties that have inflicted it. The campaign promotes illusions in putting pressure on the current Turnbull Coalition government, and the opposition Labor Party, to modify their policies. It also seeks to promote the return of a Greens-backed Labor government.

For their own electoral reasons, several state Labor Party leaders, including Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews, seized upon the “Let Them Stay” campaign to feign sympathy for the plight of refugees, and offered to accept some of the 267 as residents in their states. While appealing to Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull to show mercy, they made no criticism of the Labor Party’s continuing support for the Nauru and Manus camps. Labor’s federal shadow immigration minister Richard Marles reiterated that a Labor government would retain the policy of refusing entry to all asylum seekers arriving by boat.

The most politically conscious purveyors of the “Let Them Stay” campaign are the pseudo-left groups and the Refugee Action Coalition (RAC), whose spokesman is Ian Rintoul, a leader of Solidarity. In a March 8 article on the Solidarity group’s web site, Rintoul hailed a letter sent by Andrews to Turnbull

offering to take refugees as a “political turning point.”

According to Rintoul, “Andrews’ offer has turned up the heat on Turnbull.” He urged state premiers “to go one step further and declare they will not cooperate with any removal.” Rintoul declared: “[W]e need to step up the pressure to make the returns [of the refugees] politically impossible for Turnbull.”

Above all, Rintoul promoted the illusion that Labor could be compelled to adopt a more humane policy. “It was the mass movement under Howard last time that shifted public opinion, and pushed Labor to promise permanent protection and to close Nauru and Manus when it came to power in 2007,” he wrote.

This is a complete rewriting of history. Labor came to office in 2007 vowing to maintain the Howard government’s policy of “stopping the boats” and only shut down the camps once the number of boats dropped. In 2012, as refugees again began fleeing the violence and destruction unleashed by the US and its allies—including Australia—in Syria and Iraq, the Labor government reopened the facilities.

At the same time, Labor and the trade unions were at the forefront of demonising refugees and making them scapegoats for rising unemployment and worsening social conditions, just as they did in 1992, when the Keating Labor government first introduced the mandatory detention of all refugee arrivals.



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