

The Australian election and the assault on refugees

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Over the past two weeks, the Australian election has been increasingly marked by the whipping up of anti-refugee sentiment by the Liberal-National Coalition and the Labor Party opposition. Both parties have resorted to demonising asylum seekers, among the world's most vulnerable people, in response to worsening economic conditions and mounting public disaffection with the entire political establishment.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Immigration and Border Protection Minister Peter Dutton last week called separate media conferences so that each could boast of repelling 28 refugee boats over the past three years, with the latest 21 asylum seekers forcibly dumped back in Vietnam. Even as the UN reported there were now more than 60 million refugees around the world, mostly fleeing US-led wars in the Middle East, Turnbull and Dutton declared that Australia's denial of entry to all asylum seekers must continue.

The government is drumming up nationalism and thinly-veiled racism to try to divert growing discontent over job losses, falling wages, declining working conditions and the austerity offensive against health care, education and other essential social services. In an interview with Sky News last month, Dutton asserted that refugees fleeing to Australia "won't be numerate or literate in their own language, let alone English."

Dutton simultaneously accused refugees of threatening Australian jobs or being a welfare burden. "These people would be taking Australian jobs, there's no question about that," he declared. They would also "be unemployed, they would languish in unemployment queues and on Medicare, and the rest of it. So there would be a huge cost."

Labor leader Bill Shorten called Dutton's comments "offensive" and "deeply divisive," yet immediately reaffirmed his commitment to same "border protection"

regime of militarily turning back boats. At a recent press conference, Shorten boasted: "I had the courage to take this issue to my Labor party in the July national conference last year. I led my party and I said we will turn back boats."

The reality is the anti-refugee policy and rhetoric did not start with the Coalition. It originated with the Labor Party. In 1992, under the guise of protecting the "Australian community" amid rising unemployment, the Keating Labor government introduced the mandatory detention of all refugees—men, women and children—arriving by boat.

From 2001, under the Howard Coalition government, this model was extended, with bipartisan support from the Labor Party. The so-called Pacific Solution resulted in the incarceration of refugees on Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island in facilities that health professionals have likened to concentration camps.

In 2012, the Gillard Labor government went further. First, it reopened these camps, and decreed that detainees would remain there indefinitely, until and unless another country agreed to take them, or they returned to the country they fled. Second, it began deporting Sri Lankan refugees back to Colombo, in flagrant breach of international law, which bans "refoulement" of asylum seekers to face persecution. Some were subjected to torture, violence and imprisonment. This practice is still going on. The most recent asylum seekers were deported to Sri Lanka in May.

Under conditions of widening wars, deepening economic crisis and mounting social antagonisms, countries across Europe are now adopting the Australian model, and inciting anti-refugee hysteria to justify continued attacks on the democratic rights and social conditions of workers. As a result, thousands of

asylum seekers have died on the Mediterranean Sea or confront blocked borders and armed troops within Europe.

For this election, the Australian Greens are claiming to represent a more “compassionate” approach. Yet they are crucially responsible for the outrages committed by the last Labor government, which the Greens kept in office from 2010 to 2013. They supplied the parliamentary numbers for the minority government to survive as it locked up people on Nauru and Manus Island. The Greens have made clear their desire to join a coalition government after July 2, with either Labor or the Coalition.

The Greens advocate increasing the annual refugee intake to 50,000, selected from overseas camps. Apart from being a drop in the ocean compared to the global refugee crisis, this quota would also have to be enforced by military force and imprisonment, to bar access to any other asylum seekers.

Thus, the Greens’ policy remains fully supportive of the entire “border protection” framework of the capitalist nation-state system. Moreover, 10,000 of the 50,000 allowed in each year would be chosen as “skilled refugees”—i.e., those whose labour power can be most readily exploited by Australian employers.

The Greens also support foisting refugees onto neighbouring Asian countries, like Indonesia, which are among the poorest and most heavily-populated states in the world. The Greens propose the construction of “offshore processing centres,” run by the United Nations, like those that operated in Indonesia from 1979 to 1996. During that period, some 170,000 refugees suffered prolonged detention, with as many as 15,000 living in squalor at any one time.

Despite their record, Labor and the Greens are promoted as “progressive alternatives” by various pseudo-left organisations, such as Socialist Alliance, Socialist Alternative and Solidarity. This is part of their efforts to channel the genuine revulsion and hostility of many working class and young people back behind the election of yet another Labor or Labor-Green government, which will serve the interests of the Australian corporate elite.

The truth is that regressive asylum seeker policies cannot be answered by issuing appeals for politicians to show “compassion.” These policies flow inexorably from the nation-state system in which the private profit

system is embedded. While the capitalist class forcibly locks out asylum seekers, or grants limited entry to handpicked migrants or “guest workers,” depending on its profit requirements, the wealthy elites and their investments are free to roam the world, pitting one section of workers against the other to drive down wages and conditions.

Amid mounting geo-strategic tensions in Asia and around the world, the deliberate stirring up of anti-immigrant xenophobia is part of the ideological preparations for war. At the same time, the stripping of core democratic rights from refugees, such as no detention without charge or trial, sets a precedent for wider use in the working class to suppress unrest and resistance to the program of austerity and militarism.

That is why workers and youth must defend the basic rights of asylum seekers as an essential part of the necessary struggle to unify the working class internationally in the common struggle to overturn the capitalist system itself.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) election statement explains: “We demand the abolition of Australia’s illegal ‘border protection’ regime, which denies refugees their fundamental right to claim asylum. All people, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, religion or income, must have the right to live and work wherever in the world they choose, with full citizenship rights.”

In this election, the SEP is the only party opposing all forms of nationalism, and fighting to unite workers and youth in Australia with their counterparts across Asia, the Middle East and internationally against the drive to war, austerity and assault on fundamental democratic rights.

To contact the SEP and get involved, visit our web site or Facebook page.

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