

Canada: Refugees mount hunger strike to protest indefinite detention

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Dozens of refugees who are being detained indefinitely in two Ontario jails mounted a hunger strike last month to expose the horrific treatment to which they and thousands of others newly arrived in the country are being subjected by the Canadian government.

On July 11, a group of about 50 refugees imprisoned at the Central East Correctional Centre in Lindsay, Ontario, and the Toronto East Detention Centre started refusing food.

According to the refugee-rights groups No One Is Illegal and the End Immigration Detention Network, the hunger strikers were demanding an end to the government's policy of indefinitely detaining refugees in prisons, including maximum-security facilities. They were also protesting brutal prison practices including lockdowns and solitary confinement.

On the weekend of July 30-31, detainees at the Lindsay facility began accepting food.

Karen Cocq, a leading member of both refugee-rights organizations, explained that some migrants are "locked up in prison for 2, 3 or 5 years and don't have access to health services and medication."

The refugee-rights groups had been urging Liberal Minister of Public Safety Ralph Goodale to meet the prisoners, a demand he rejected despite urgent warnings by a group of medical specialists that the strikers' health was in danger.

The Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) issued a statement saying it "took notice of the circumstances and was working closely with the detainees in order to resolve quickly and safely the hunger strike." But pro-refugee activists charged that "prison authorities, likely under CBSA instructions, are doing everything in their power to break the strike."

One of the strike organizers was deported at the end of July, after 26 months behind bars. Others were threatened with transfer.

Goodale refused to meet with the hunger strikers, let alone address their concerns. Instead, he penned a column for the *Huffington Post* in which he whitewashed the CBSA and the

criminal character of indefinite detention, a measure that tramples on basic human rights, the UN Refugee Convention, and international law. He called for "reform" of the detention system, including the building of new federally funded facilities for detainees. These would effectively serve as prisons, but cost the government less.

Most of the refugee detainees have fled political repression or desperate conditions in countries that have been ravaged by imperialist-imposed economic restructuring programs and imperialist war, as in the Middle East. They are being detained without trial or charge on administrative grounds, such as the CBSA's claim that their identity cannot be verified or that they constitute a "flight risk."

Their imprisonment makes a mockery of the attempt by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to portray himself and his Liberal government as "progressive" and a friend of refugees.

Last December, the media gave Trudeau wall-to-wall coverage when he met the first planeload of Syrian refugees on the tarmac of Toronto's Pearson Airport. The prime minister made a show of handing out winter jackets, Canadian flags, and teddy bears to the refugees and told those who were fleeing the war and social devastation caused by Canada and the other imperialist powers that they were now "home."

Trudeau's pledge to bring 25,000 carefully selected Syrian refugees to Canada, a tiny fraction of the 4 million who have fled the country and the millions more who have been internally displaced, was an election ploy. It was aimed at appealing to the groundswell of popular support for the refugees and at camouflaging the Liberals' right-wing agenda, including plans to strengthen Ottawa's military-security partnership with Washington and expand Canada's participation in the US-led war in Iraq and Syria.

While the government now boasts about having fulfilled its pledge to accept 25,000 Syrian refugees, many of those who arrived last winter were privately sponsored and are now facing government demands that they pay up to \$10,000 for their relocation to Canada. Moreover, no sooner

was the 25,000-target met than the government slashed the staff working on applications, leaving thousands who were in the processing of applying to come to Canada stranded in miserable conditions in refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan and other countries.

Behind its “progressive” and humanitarian facade, the Trudeau Liberal government has continued the aggressive, militarist foreign policy that the Harper Conservatives pursued on behalf of Canadian imperialism. It is also upholding the reactionary changes that Liberal and Conservative governments have made to the refugee determination process over the past two decades.

Although Canada has never been a haven for migrants and asylum seekers, recent years have witnessed a dramatic assault on their rights. Under the Chretien-Martin Liberal government, a law was passed that strips anyone who arrived in Canada via a “safe third country” of the right to even apply for refugee status.

In 2012, the former Harper government tabled the draconian “Refugee Exclusion Act” (Bill C-31), which legalizes mandatory incarceration for refugees designated as “irregular arrivals.” Under this law, which was presented as a way to reduce the flow of “bogus refugees” and “people-smuggling,” migrants, including children, can be detained for a year pending a governmental review of their case.

This legislation, which was drafted by the Conservatives but is now being implemented by the Trudeau Liberals, effectively strips refugees of basic democratic rights, including freedom from arbitrary detention, the right to freedom and security, and habeas corpus (the right to have a detention challenged quickly and by an independent court or judge).

In 2015, the Conservatives, with Liberal support, rushed through a new “anti-terrorism” law (Bill C-51) that dramatically increases the coercive powers of the state. This includes granting the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) the power to break virtually any law in thwarting purported threats to public security. As a result of Bill C-51’s expansive new definition of activities deemed to “undermine the security of Canada,” the CBSA and government have much greater leeway to reject refugee claims and deny applicants permanent residence status. Bill C-51 also entrenches in law the state power to incarcerate non-residents indefinitely—a practice the UN Human Rights Commission has explicitly condemned.

As a result of the past two decades of regressive changes to Canadian policy, thousands of migrants are victims of what the government calls “preventive detention.” Many are being held in maximum-security prison facilities, often alongside criminals or in segregation units even though they have been charged with no crime.

Immigration detention is one of the fastest growing forms of incarceration in Canada. The Canadian government jailed more than least 87,300 refugee claimants and other migrants without charge between 2000 and 2014. Of these, more than 4,000 were minors under the age of 18.

On any given day, some 400 migrants are held in detention in Canada, including more than 200 in Ontario jails. Over one third of all migrant detainees are held in provincial prisons, and the rest are imprisoned in one of three CBSA-run immigration-holding centers in Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver.

The conditions of detention, while largely concealed by the government and the corporate media, are atrocious. Since 2000, at least 15 people have died while detained by the CBSA, including 3 since the Liberals came to power just nine months ago.

Refugee claimants are usually detained on the basis that because their identities cannot be confirmed, they constitute a “security threat.”

Many refugees refrain from giving border agents much information because they fear being quickly sent back to their war-torn countries. In 2012, as part of Bill C-31, the government established a list of 27 countries deemed “safe.” Refugee claimants from these countries are deported through a fast-tracked process, with no right to appeal a negative decision.

For those refugees who are lucky enough not to be imprisoned, life is often extremely harsh. They live in poverty with difficulty finding jobs or decent housings in metropolitan cities where a two-bedroom apartment can easily cost C\$1,500-C\$2,000 per month, if not more. Many face language barriers and social isolation, while trying to cope with psychological distress arising from the traumatic experiences that they endured in their country of origin. Government cuts to health care and public services have only exacerbated this stark reality.



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