

Former detention centre workers condemn Australia's brutal refugee regime

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In two public letters, more than 100 former staff members, managers, teachers and health professionals this month demanded the immediate closure of the Australian-run refugee “regional processing centres” on Nauru and Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island. The letters called for the incarcerated asylum seekers to be brought to Australia.

The letters were written in response to the recently-leaked Nauru Files, which contain over 2,000 incident reports from 2013 to 2015 and reveal some of the harsh and oppressive conditions in the camps. The files expose officially suppressed and buried cases of violence, mistreatment and suicide attempts among the more than 600 refugees, including 104 children, indefinitely detained on Nauru.

Many of the people signing their names to the letters were authors of the leaked reports. Their courageous public stand defies amendments to Australia’s Border Force Act last year that impose lengthy prison times for revealing the inhumane treatment of asylum seekers.

Those writing the letters described the Nauru Files as only a partial picture of the abuses inflicted on detainees. They also pointed out that previous government and parliamentary inquiries had documented many such complaints, without producing any change in the cruel regime.

The first letter, released on August 10, was signed by 26 employees of organisations hired by the Australian government to guard or provide services in the centres, many of whom were speaking out for the first time.

Natasha Blucher, a former Save the Children senior case worker, wrote: “Despite the clinical and objective language... these reports document intense suffering experienced by families, children and individuals and are irrefutable evidence of the harm caused by offshore detention.”

Jane Willey, who was a teacher on Nauru, stated: “It appears from looking through the published database that nowhere near the full extent of the incident reports written on a day to day basis have been released. What you are seeing here is just the tip of the iceberg.”

Others said Wilson Security, the firm contracted by the head contractor Ferroviaal (formerly Transfield and Broadspectrum) to provide guard services, had buried many incident reports.

“It was very common for us to write incident reports which were then scrutinised by Wilson Security and downgraded in importance,” Judith Reen, another former teacher in Nauru, wrote. “We were expected to simply report incidents and then trust Wilsons, the very organisation whose staff were sometimes alleged perpetrators, to conduct investigations.”

Alyssa Munoz, who was a Save the Children child protection worker, said: “Many of these incidents were not investigated by us, but were instead conducted by untrained Wilsons staff and local police.” This “often created more trauma for the families and children involved, and ... did not result in the removal of the children from the harmful environment of the RPC [Regional Processing Centre] or the provision of appropriate support to families.”

The second letter, released on August 17, condemned the comments of Border Protection Minister Peter Dutton, who dismissed the Nauru files as “hype.” Chris Loughed, a Save the Children deputy education manager, demanded that the Liberal-National government take responsibility for the abuses, stating that the “reports are accurate observations written by experienced professionals.”

The letter rejected any conception that a Senate inquiry into the Nauru Files, as proposed by the opposition Labor Party and the Greens, would change

the situation. “It is quite simply not enough,” the letter stated, noting that “many of the former staff have already made submissions and given evidence to a number of inquiries, investigations and reviews.”

Natasha Reid, who was a case manager with Broadspectrum, wrote: “We’ve given evidence and it’s been ignored.” Reid said nothing had changed since the last Senate inquiry. “The camp is not safer, conditions have not improved, the physical and mental decline of those held continues.”

Shivani Keecha, a former coordinator of the Save the Children’s child protection team on Nauru, echoed Reid’s comments. “I worked on Nauru while several previous investigations and inquiries were held,” she wrote. “Nothing changed. It was already too little, too late. We don’t need more evidence.”

These statements are an indictment of the various government inquiries and investigations that have been conducted. A Senate inquiry last year, headed by the Greens, was designed to cover over the responsibility of successive Labor and Liberal-National Coalition governments, as well as that of the Greens themselves.

The Greens gave crucial support to Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s Labor government, which reopened the Nauru and Manus camps in 2012. The Greens provided the minority government with the parliamentary numbers to stay in office. Gillard’s government went beyond the previous Coalition government, which originally established the centres, by vowing that refugees would remain imprisoned for many years—effectively indefinitely—as a deliberate means of deterring asylum seekers from trying to reach Australia.

In response to the Nauru Files, the Labor Party reiterated its commitment to retain the detention centres, while hypocritically claiming to oppose indefinite detention. It proposed another Senate inquiry, in an attempt to deflect the mounting public outrage over the barbaric regime that it introduced.

The Greens, who for years postured as defenders of refugee rights, initially called for a royal commission into the Nauru Files. This would serve only as a slightly more sophisticated mechanism for whitewashing the political responsibility for the violations of international law and other crimes being committed against the refugees. Later, Greens leader Richard Di Natale embraced Labor’s stance, saying: “In the absence of a royal commission, we think a

parliamentary inquiry is absolutely justified.”

The principled stand taken by ex-employees from the camps reflects the broader sentiment of growing numbers of working people, who are appalled by the conditions inflicted on asylum seekers. However, the answer cannot be found in simply closing the camps and bringing those inside to Australia, where they would be still liable to detention or ongoing insecurity, trauma and denial of basic legal and democratic rights as temporary visa holders.

Rather, the abuses inflicted on the detainees flow directly from reactionary logic of national “border protection,” which was spelt out with the Keating Labor government’s 1992 introduction of mandatory detention for asylum seekers. Humanity is confronting a global refugee emergency, with millions of people fleeing the wars triggered by the United States and its allies, including Australia, in the Middle East and elsewhere. Rather than punitive detention refugees should be released immediately, provided support and assistance, and granted full citizenship rights.



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