

Australian tabloid vilifies Muslim immigrants and welfare recipients

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The Murdoch-owned *Daily Telegraph*, a Sydney tabloid, recently launched a campaign to collectively demonise Muslim immigrants, refugees and welfare recipients. It led with a front-page article claiming that “Middle Eastern migrants are piling up the dole queue.”

These efforts, based on lies and distortions, aim to generate support for the Turnbull government’s assault on welfare entitlements, including the reintroduction of widely-despised welfare cuts, while whipping up anti-Muslim bigotry as a means of diverting social discontent away from the government and the corporate elite that are demanding the brutal cuts.

Taking isolated statistics completely out of their economic and social context, the article claims the unemployment rate among Middle Eastern and North African immigrants has more than doubled in the past ten years and they are “three times more likely than European or Asian immigrants to be out of work in the first five years.”

These claims are drawn from monthly labour force data released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) since January 1991. The figures indeed indicate that the official unemployment rate among workers from North Africa and the Middle East—33.5 percent—is much higher than those “born in Australia”—5.5 percent. But the claim that this rate has more than doubled in the past decade deliberately distorts the statistics, which display considerable volatility.

While the figure for December 2016, 33.5 percent, is more than double the rate in December 2006, 14.1 percent, it is not double the figure in January 2007, which is 20.7 percent, one month later. The average unemployment rate for those from North Africa and the Middle East in 2006 was 18.8 percent, just 3.2 percent lower than 2016, whose average was 22 percent.

Moreover, the December 2016 result is not the highest in the past ten years—it reached 40.2 percent in March 2009. In the past, the percentage has been even higher, ballooning to 64.8 percent in February 1996.

The *Daily Telegraph*’s inflammatory article singling out and blaming Muslims for being on the dole queue stands reality on its head.

The figures indicate that, as expected, new arrivals face great difficulty in finding work, both as a result of the ongoing destruction of full-time jobs for all workers and endemic discrimination by employers against immigrant workers, who generally regard them only as opportunities for super-exploitation.

All those who are unemployed, whatever the statistics for particular ethnic groups, should have the basic social right to decent welfare payments, which are an essential protection against destitution, under conditions of worsening unemployment and under-employment.

Yet that social right is precisely what is under attack across the board. As one of the most vulnerable layers of the working class, these refugees and immigrants are being targeted as part of a wider drive to further wind back the totally inadequate, below-poverty-line payments that are made to jobless and disabled workers.

Though the article refrains from drawing direct conclusions on Australia’s refugee program, it refers disparagingly to government spending on education programs for humanitarian visa holders. It also states that, unlike “other migrants,” refugees do not have to “wait two years for welfare payments.” The implication is that those Muslims in the “dole queue” are mainly refugees.

The *Daily Telegraph* insinuates that Australia is accepting too many Middle Eastern immigrants and

refugees. The article states that the number of Iraqi-born migrants has increased by 38 percent in ten years, to 63,000 and that the “number of Syrian settlers is set to double” as a result of the government’s promise, more than a year ago, to accept 12,000 refugees from Syria.

This material is part of a broader campaign to channel the mounting social tensions produced by the destruction of jobs, cuts to basic services and soaring housing prices in reactionary and divisive directions, and away from the real causes of the worsening social conditions, which lie in the capitalist profit system itself.

The propaganda goes hand in hand with the Murdoch press’s promotion of right-wing populists, like One Nation’s Pauline Hanson, who advocate immigration bans, welfare cutoffs and increased military spending. Emulating US President Donald Trump, Hanson has stridently backed his measures to ban Muslims from entering the US, and demanded similar measures in Australia.

In the corporate media, people relying on pitiful welfare benefits are routinely depicted as parasites or fraudsters, in line with the government’s proposed \$7.5 billion cuts to welfare over the next four years and its deepening welfare “debt” crackdown. In recent months, thousands of unemployment and sickness benefit recipients have been sent letters demanding they pay back thousands of dollars in alleged overpayments, and threatening them with debt collectors and jail.

Despite a public outcry against this offensive, and protests by the Centrelink workers who have been ordered to carry it out, the government plans to soon extend it to sole parents, pensioners and others relying on welfare.

The scapegoating of immigrants is not isolated to the Murdoch media. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation, a state-funded network, published a report last month declaring that “high immigration masks Australian economic decline.” According to the article, immigrants are driving soaring house prices and reductions in wages.

The article concluded by saying the “reason why many people feel that they haven’t benefitted from Australia’s long stretch of economic expansion, is quite simply because they haven’t.” This was put down to high immigration being good for business, but not

“necessarily good for ordinary workers.”

Such demagoguery is used to conceal the true source of the worsening social conditions and widening inequality, both in Australia and worldwide. That is the ever-more ruthless and parasitic operations of the financial and corporate elites, which profit both by eliminating jobs and driving down wages and conditions, and by speculative investment in the real estate and share markets. US-led militarism across the Middle East, in which Australian forces are heavily involved, has also caused the greatest refugee crisis since World War II, with more than 60 million people forced to flee their homes.

The capitalist class is not only seeking to eliminate every basic social program that once ameliorated, if only slightly, the constant financial stress that working-class households confront. Amid the rising trade and military tensions between the US and other major powers, there is also a drive to place the country on a war footing, with \$195 billion to be spent on military hardware over the next decade, the cost of which will be borne by workers and youth.



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