Turnbull government announces anti-immigrant “Australia first” policies

Oscar Grenfell
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Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull announced on Tuesday that his Liberal-National Coalition government is abolishing the “457” visa category in a reactionary move directed against foreign workers who gain employment in Australia under this longstanding arrangement. Turnbull followed up today by unveiling a series of discriminatory measures to make it more difficult to acquire Australian citizenship.

Turnbull asserted that the cancellation of 457 visas “reflects our policy of putting Australians and Australian jobs first.” He declared: “This is all about Australia’s interest.”

Turnbull’s insular, economic nationalist rhetoric is a clear departure from his assertions last year, before the July federal election, that it was the “most exciting time to be alive” and global “opportunities” existed for “innovative, agile, courageous” entrepreneurs.

The shift echoes the “buy American, hire American” policy introduced by the US administration of Donald Trump, crackdowns on the rights of foreign workers in New Zealand, Britain and elsewhere, and the growth of extreme right-wing tendencies internationally.

When an interviewer yesterday commented that Turnbull’s policies were “Trumpesque,” the prime minister did not disavow the comparison. Like the Trump administration, the Australian government is seeking to divert growing social discontent over unemployment and underemployment, the rising cost of living and cuts to education, healthcare and other social services, into the reactionary xenophobic channels.

At the same time, the measures are aimed at heading-off a deepening crisis of the Coalition government, which holds office with a fragile one-seat majority. Turnbull faces incessant demands from big business for sweeping austerity measures in the looming May budget, amid open divisions within the Liberal Party and constant speculation of a move against his leadership.

Turnbull’s announcement came just two days after Tony Abbott, whom he replaced as prime minister in a September 2015 leadership coup, launched his latest public broadside.

Abbott declared on national radio that Australians were “fed up with underperforming government.” His comments were a veiled reference to frustrations in the corporate elite that the government has not pressed ahead quickly enough with its austerity agenda, and recent symptoms of popular discontent, including last month’s routing of the Liberal Party in the Western Australian state election. Abbott is demanding that the government adopt his proposals for even harsher measures against immigrants.

Turnbull’s measures are also a transparent attempt to secure support from the constituencies of various right-wing, anti-immigrant formations. Senator Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party is polling as high as 10 percent in the state of Queensland, where an election is due by early next year. Senator Cory Bernardi, who split from the government in February, has formed the “Australian Conservatives” on an explicitly xenophobic program. Both Hanson and Bernardi responded to Turnbull’s announcements by declaring the government was adopting their policies.

The visa changes potentially affect tens of thousands of prospective foreign workers. There are currently over 95,000 overseas workers employed in Australia on 457 visas. The government will replace 457 visas with a two-year temporary visa, and a four-year visa for highly skilled workers.

Immigration Minister Peter Dutton said yesterday that unlike workers on 457 visas, employees on the two-year visa would be blocked from “permanent residency

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outcomes" at the end of their work period, restricting their right to continue working in Australia and ultimately seek citizenship.

The number of occupations eligible for temporary work visa status has also reportedly been cut from 651 to 435. According to modelling by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 8.6 percent of visas granted under the 457 arrangements would be blocked under the new regulations.

Foreign workers seeking employment in human resources, production management, sales, market research and computer support will all be hit by the changes. Leading academics and scientists have warned that the changes, which include a requirement of two years' work experience in the relevant field, could prevent foreign doctoral graduates from being hired in important research roles.

The Labor Party and the trade unions, which have waged a continuous campaign against 457 visas, denounced the government policy for not going far enough in curtailing the working rights of overseas citizens. Labor leader Bill Shorten said the policy was a "con job" that would make "no real difference."

Union leaders made similar comments. Australian Workers Union national secretary Daniel Walton summed up their reactionary line, declaring that the policy was just "window dressing" and "is not going to benefit Australian workers in the long-run."

Labor and the unions have employed "Australia first" demagogy in a bid to divide workers along nationalist lines, and divert from their own role in collaborating with the major corporations in the destruction of jobs, wages and working conditions.

The Greens also denounced Turnbull's measures from the right. Adam Bandt, the party's employment spokesman, called for the revision of trade agreements that include provisions for foreign workers to be employed in Australia. Bandt singled out the China-Australia Free Trade Agreement, which has been the subject of a thinly-veiled racist, anti-Chinese campaign by Labor, the unions and the Greens.

Like the visa overhaul, the government's new citizenship requirements are a continuation of bipartisan attempts to curtail the democratic rights of migrants. Speaking before the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry yesterday, Turnbull couched the changes in the language of the fraudulent "war on terror," and the demonisation of refugees and other migrants. He declared that the new requirements were aimed at "ensuring social cohesion while enhancing our security."

Underscoring their anti-democratic character, the laws are set to be backdated to April 19, supposedly to prevent a "flood of applications" prior to their passage.

Among the foreshadowed measures are higher-standard English tests, which inevitably discriminate against migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds and poorer immigrants with limited formal education. Other changes include extending residency requirements from one year to four, requiring proof of "allegiance" to Australia, and forcing migrants to provide "evidence of integration," including tax payments and employment records.

The new measures are also aimed at extending the powers of the government to discriminate against prospective immigrants because of their religious or political views. Under the pretext of targeting "religious extremists," the new requirements will include an expanded test of unspecified "Australian values," effectively providing for a political interrogation of prospective citizens by immigration authorities. Government documents leaked in February last year revealed plans for ongoing mass surveillance of immigrants.

The latest changes are of a piece with previous measures. In late 2015, the government pushed through legislation, with the Labor Party's backing, enabling it to revoke the citizenship of dual nationals, effectively abolishing citizenship as an inalienable democratic right.

That measure, along with others introduced under the banner of "Australian values," have created a body of legislation that can be used against opponents of war, austerity and virtually any other government policy.

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