Australian government demonises “fake refugees”

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In a preparation for mass deportations, the Australian government has threatened thousands of asylum seekers with forced removal to their countries of origin if they do not complete complex visa applications by October 1.

Immigration and Border Protection Minister Peter Dutton last Sunday falsely claimed that 7,500 refugees living in Australia were “refusing to provide any detail” about their protection visa claims, referring to them as “fake refugees.” Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull backed his threat.

Escalating the Liberal-National government’s anti-refugee witch-hunting, Dutton declared: “If people think that they can rip the Australian taxpayer off, if people think that they can con the Australian taxpayer, then I’m sorry, the game’s up, and we are not going to allow people to take Australian taxpayers for a ride.”

Dutton’s comments not only blatantly prejudice any prospect of the asylum seekers receiving a fair hearing for their visa applications. The government’s purpose is clearly to mislead and poison public opinion in order to demonise refugees fleeing persecution and wars, mostly victims of the predatory US-led military aggression throughout the Middle East.

Most of the people that Dutton slandered as fraudsters were barred from even applying for visas until late last year. Now, those who fail to lodge their complex 60-page claim forms by October 1 will be stripped of their already minimal welfare rights until their deportations can be executed.

Dutton directed his remarks, in the first instance, against the so-called “legacy caseload” of approximately 30,000 asylum seekers who arrived in Australia by boat under the previous Labor government, which then froze their refugee claims, throwing them into a state of legal limbo.

Labor’s cruel bar on visa applications operated from 2012 until the Coalition government began to permit some members of the group to initiate applications from 2015. However, the ban on applications was not fully lifted until late 2016.

Effectively Dutton is declaring every refugee “fake” who has not yet been able to lodge their visa applications, marking them guilty until proven innocent. Like the Labor government, his media release branded refugees as Illegal Maritime Arrivals (IMAs).

This is a direct violation of the 1951 Refugee Convention, which upholds the rights of people to flee persecution without discrimination, and forbids them being deported to face the risk of death, torture, punishment or oppression.

As a result of the Labor government’s anti-refugee measures, thousands of asylum seekers who reached Australia by boat after August 2012 have been living ever since on temporary bridging visas, with no right to family reunion.

Under legislation introduced by the current government in late 2014, some of these refugees can apply for two types of short-term visas: Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs) or Safe Haven Enterprise Visas (SHEV). These visas also violate basic rights and international refugee law, denying permanent protection from persecution.

TPVs must be reviewed every three years, so refugees constantly fear deportation and find it difficult to secure work and accommodation. SHEVs are even more oppressive. They turn asylum seekers into cheap labour, forced to obtain work in rural or regional areas, under immense pressure to accept sub-standard pay and conditions.

The Liberal-National government introduced a “Fast Track Assessment” regime in 2014, which deprived

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asylum seekers of any right to appeal to a tribunal against visa refusals, instead subjecting them to “on papers” reviews by an Immigration Assessment Authority.

With no government-funded support to complete the applications asylum seekers rely on pro bono legal firms to help complete the forms. Community legal centres have thousands of clients on their books awaiting assistance with protection claims, which require the completion of 184 questions and a detailed written statement.

Refugee lawyers denounced the government’s announcement, explaining that the deadline is arbitrary and unfair. Dutton immediately attacked the lawyers, saying they “can rant all they want.” His remark underscores the official contempt for basic legal rights.

Dutton’s announcement comes amid a mounting social crisis. The May 9 federal budget has been met with widespread hostility by working people, who face falling wages, increased taxes, cuts to education, attacks on health care and a new assault on welfare recipients and unemployed workers.

In an attempt to channel this social anger along reactionary nationalist lines, Dutton tried to blame asylum seekers for the budget deficit. “This is a very serious situation,” he said, “that’s costing Australian taxpayers hundreds of millions dollars a year—money that could be spent on education, on health, on police, on other services in the community.”

The Labor Party’s immigration spokesperson Shane Neumann hypocritically criticised Dutton’s use of the term “fake refugees” but indicated Labor’s support for the deportation deadline, insisting “it’s important the people make their application as soon as possible.”

Labor has a long record of vilifying refugees, starting with Prime Minister Bob Hawke’s denunciations of boat arrivals as “queue jumpers” during the 1980s. It was the Keating Labor government that first introduced mandatory detention of all asylum seekers in 1992, during a period of the wholesale privatisation of state assets and destruction of thousands of jobs.

In 2012, the deeply unpopular Gillard Labor government, which faced a landslide election defeat the following year, reopened the barbaric refugee prison camps on Nauru and Manus Island, Papua New Guinea. That government was kept in office by the Greens, with whose backing Labor formed a minority government in 2010.

The Greens offered a token criticism of the October 1 deadline. Greens immigration spokesperson Senator Nick McKim called it “deeply unfair and a denial of natural justice.” However, the Greens entirely support the underlying system of enforcing national borders.

Governments around the globe—from Donald Trump to his European counterparts—are scapegoating asylum seekers to direct social tensions outward. As the refugee crisis worsens, mainly due to the imperialist wars of aggression led by the US and supported by Australia, they are attempting to dehumanise the most vulnerable layers of the working class to ram through anti-democratic and draconian austerity policies.

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