

Australian government strips asylum seekers of all housing and welfare payments

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On Monday, the Turnbull government suddenly stripped around 100 asylum seekers currently living in Australia of their pitiful income support of \$100 a week and demanded they leave their public housing within three weeks, effectively leaving them destitute and homeless.

The asylum seekers had been transferred to Australia for medical treatment from the country's offshore detention centres on Nauru and Manus Island, Papua New Guinea. While the initial targets are single people, who may include pregnant women, around 400 other men, women and children, including more than 37 infants, could be next.

This is a premeditated and calculated attack on the basic legal and democratic rights of refugees, designed to give them no choice but to go back into indefinite detention on Nauru or Manus, or be deported to the countries they fled. It is part of a new turn by the increasingly unstable Liberal-National Coalition government to try to whip up a nationalistic and xenophobic constituency.

Defending the move on talkback radio, Immigration and Border Protection Minister Peter Dutton, one of the government's key figures, branded lawyers who represent asylum seekers as "un-Australian." In other words, it is treasonous for lawyers to perform their obligations to defend the legal rights of their clients.

Dutton demonised both the lawyers and the refugees, saying lawyers were "playing the game with these people," who were taking Australia "for a ride."

The government is using a new form of visa—the "final departure Bridging E Visa"—which is the first step to deportation. Immigration Department letters, leaked to the media, told the asylum seekers: "You will be expected to support yourself in the community until departing Australia. From Monday 28 August you will

need to find money each week for your own accommodation costs."

The letters added: "From this date, you will also be responsible for all your other living costs like food, clothing and transport. You are expected to sign the Code of Behaviour when you are released into the Australian community. The Code of Behaviour outlines how you are to behave in the community."

Anyone who violates the repressive code can be deported. Under the code, visa holders must adhere to "Australian values," not withhold information from officials, and not engage in any "anti-social" or "disruptive" activities.

According to the department, "anti-social" means "an action that is against the order of society. This may include damaging property, spitting or swearing in public or other actions that other people might find offensive. "Disruptive" means "to cause disorder or to disturb someone or something."

Under previous visas, the refugees were not permitted to work and had to depend on charities. Now, they will be permitted to work, but many cannot due to medical conditions and employers are unlikely to hire people who are living under constant threat of removal.

Having endured great suffering, fled persecution and then been incarcerated in hellhole conditions on Nauru or Manus Island, these innocent people are now being reduced to penury to try to force them back to harm. They are being cruelly punished in order to deter any refugees from attempting to seek asylum in Australia.

For months, the government has also threatened thousands of other asylum seekers, currently living in Australia, with forced removal to their countries of origin if they do not complete complex refugee visa applications by October 1.

The government's latest actions have provoked

widespread outrage and thousands of people across the country have offered sanctuary to the asylum seekers. On social media, people have offered rooms in their homes, food and clothing. Numbers of churches have offered protection and financial support.

This is not the first time that the government has sought to evict the refugees. Protests erupted around Australia in March last year when the government announced plans to remove 267 people back to the offshore camps.

At the time, the Turnbull government claimed to have backed down from its assault, but as the WSWs pointed out, this was only a temporary reprieve. Various online protest groups, the Greens and pseudo-left groups heralded this as a great victory, and proof that the government and the rest of the political establishment could be pressured into changing course.

This “Let Them Stay” campaign was also designed to funnel popular opposition back behind the political parties that threw the refugees into detention in the first place—namely the Greens-backed Labor government that reopened Manus Island and Nauru in 2012.

A similar line up is occurring again. Because of groundswell opposition, Labor politicians are attempting to distance themselves from the government’s move, while reiterating their bipartisan commitment that no refugee who tries to enter Australia by boat will ever be permitted to settle in the country.

Labor leader Bill Shorten described the government’s policy as “cowardly and cruel” and Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull’s “weakest move yet.”

At the same time, he claimed that it had “nothing to do with strong borders or stopping people-smugglers.” These are the code words that both Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition have used to package their anti-refugee regime. Shorten restated his agreement with the government that “we don’t want to see the people smugglers back in business.”

Greens leader Senator Richard Di Natale said he was seeking advice on whether the creation of the new bridging visa could be disallowed in the Senate. “We do call on members of the crossbench and the Labor party to support us in doing everything we can to stop this unspeakable cruel act getting through the Senate,” Di Natale said.

This posturing is just as hypocritical as Labor’s. The

Greens propped up the minority Labor government of Julia Gillard when it reopened the prison camps on Manus and Nauru. The government’s latest move underscores how far it will go to enforce the brutal regime that Labor put in place.

With the US-led wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria escalating, the world refugee crisis, the greatest since World War II, will worsen. In response, governments across the globe have vilified refugees and fomented xenophobia, with Australian governments pioneering the inhuman drive to “stop the boats.”



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