

Australia: Thousands protest persecution of refugees on Manus Island

Oscar Grenfell
6 November 2017

Thousands of people participated in demonstrations across Australia over the weekend in opposition to the Liberal-National Coalition government's ongoing persecution of 600 refugees at the Manus Island Detention Centre in Papua New Guinea.

The Coalition government moved to close the Australian-operated centre last Tuesday, overseeing the shutoff of water supplies and electricity. The refugees have refused to leave, pointing to the dangerous conditions at so-called "alternative accommodation" centres on Manus and the Pacific Island of Nauru.

Over the past days, Papua New Guinea (PNG) naval and military forces have blocked emergency food supplies to the asylum-seekers, while threatening to launch an armed assault on the camp. The refugees are reportedly suffering dehydration, hunger and a range of physical and mental health illnesses.

The Coalition government has rebuffed demands from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees that supplies be restored to the centre, and that the asylum-seekers be transported to Australia.

At Saturday's protests, demonstrators carried placards stating, "Let them in," "Refugees are welcome" and "Close the camps."

Several thousand people participated in the Melbourne protest, briefly shutting-down traffic at the city's Swanston and Flinders Street intersection. They were met by 50 heavily-armed members of the state's riot squad. Around 800 people demonstrated in Sydney, while hundreds took part in rallies in Brisbane, Adelaide and other cities.

Organisers of the Sydney protest played a recorded speech by Behrouz Boochani, an Iranian refugee at the Manus Island camp.

"This place is like a war-zone," Boochani said. "We have become refugees for a second time inside this hell-hole. We have been abandoned and left to fend for

ourselves as best as we can. We are forgotten people who have been under torture in an Australian prison camp for almost five years, even though we have committed no crime."

Nicole Judge, who worked at the Manus Island centre for the Salvation Army before becoming a whistleblower, also spoke. She reviewed the dire conditions facing the detainees: "We know that they've cut off their electricity, we know they don't have air conditioning, we know they don't have food, they're digging for water in a well. The water is contaminated."

Judge noted that during her time in the camp, she had seen Australian government contractors assault the asylum-seekers. She said that the PNG "mobile squad" forces stationed outside the camp had previously been involved in violent attacks on the refugees.

The political purpose of the protests, however, was to channel anger behind impotent appeals to the Coalition, and calls for the re-election of a Greens-backed Labor government.

Ian Rintoul, of the pseudo-left Solidarity organisation, said the rally's aim was to "call on the Australian government and the Labor Party to speak out and lift the siege." "Dutton could lift the siege within minutes with a phone call," Rintoul said, referring to Immigration Minister Peter Dutton, who has previously described refugees as "illiterate," "innumerate" and out to "steal Australian jobs."

Rintoul repeatedly demanded that the Labor Party end its "silence" on the Manus Island crisis. In reality, Labor has been vocal in its support for the persecution of the refugees. The day before the protest, Labor leader Bill Shorten issued a statement reiterating his party's opposition to the right to seek asylum. "Australia is not and must not be a resettlement option," Shorten said.

All of the speakers sought to whitewash Labor's record. Daniel Cotton, of the University of Sydney Refugee

Action Group, claimed that a “movement” of Labor members and “unionists” had forced the incoming federal Labor government to halt the attacks on asylum-seekers in 2007.

Cotton did not mention that over the ensuing years, the Labor governments of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard reopened the concentration camps on Manus Island and Nauru, and decreed that the refugees consigned there would never be allowed into Australia.

Rintoul likewise stated that many “Labor Party politicians” and “members” were “sickened” by the “bipartisan policy of offshore detention.” He provided no evidence for this assertion.

In fact, it was the Labor government of Paul Keating which in 1992 introduced mandatory detention for asylum-seekers. Since then, the Labor Party has spearheaded the attacks on refugees, in line with the nationalist program of “White Australia,” upon which it was founded over one hundred years ago.

The Greens were also provided with a platform to posture as defenders of refugees. New South Wales Greens MP David Shoebridge described the Manus Island crisis as a “dark stain on our nation,” declaring that it was necessary to “force our government to show some decency.”

Shoebridge’s comments made clear that the Greens are primarily fearful that the brutal treatment of refugees is discrediting Australian capitalism on the world stage, and deepening popular alienation from the political establishment.

Shoebridge, and all of the other speakers, were silent on the fact that the Greens were in a de facto coalition with the Gillard government when it reopened the Manus Island centre. At the time, prominent Greens MPs repeatedly insisted that the move, and other attacks on democratic rights, would not affect the alliance between their party and Labor.

Both Shoebridge and Rintoul concluded their remarks by calling for the reelection of a federal Greens-backed Labor government, which would be no less committed to the persecution of refugees than the Coalition.

In opposition to the official line-up at the rallies, Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaigners explained that the assault on refugees was bound up with the drive to war, supported by the entire political establishment, including the Greens and the pseudo-lefts, and the accompanying turn to authoritarian forms of rule.

SEP supporters insisted that only on the basis of an internationalist and socialist program, which rejects the

entire framework of national “border controls” and fights for the unity of the working class around the world, could the democratic rights of refugees—to live and work wherever they choose with full citizenship rights—be defended.

WSWS reporters spoke to several participants at the Sydney protest.

John said, “I’m here because I am absolutely horrified at the situation that has been started by this government and has evolved to the point where there are 600 men abandoned there without any support.

“The Papua New Guineans don’t want them there, the men don’t want to be there, and yet our government has left them out to dry without any support whatsoever. That is not what I would like the country I am living in to do.”

John condemned Labor, noting that “Manus and Nauru were put in place by the previous government and I’ve been appalled that Labor has supported the offshore detention from the beginning. I think it is wrong.”

Speaking of his own experiences, John commented: “I immigrated here myself and it was one of the most unpleasant experiences I ever went through. I am an American and was doing it all legally and I didn’t come here in a boat, but I was treated like crap. It took over four months for me to be allowed to immigrate.

“That was 30 years ago and nowadays, I can’t imagine what it would be like to try to become a citizen of this country, especially for desperate refugees coming here by boat.”

Katy recalled the arrival of refugees after the Second World War. “I look at photos of the arrivals every week at a place I visit,” she said. “And the looks on the faces as they are getting off the boats; hundreds of Jewish refugees, children, arriving in Australia. That is something we are proud of and look at what we are doing now.”

“It’s like our Guantanamo isn’t it?” Katy said, likening the Manus Island camp to the US prison in Cuba, where individuals are detained without charge and subjected to torture. She pointed to the broader implications of the assault on democratic rights, asking, “What is next, and who will be targeted? That is what worries me as well.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact