

Australia: Hundreds of immigration detainees launch hunger strikes

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Over the past two weeks, hundreds of detainees have launched hunger strikes against the inhumane conditions to which they are subjected in immigration centres across Australia.

Around 200 detainees at the Melbourne Immigration Transit Accommodation (MITA) centre initiated the wave of protests on January 9. Days later, on January 14, some 250 immigrants at the Yongah Hill detention centre in Western Australia also began a hunger strike.

The MITA protest initially ended after a week when officials agreed to paltry improvements to the facility, including curtains for toilets and showers that were built without doors. The detainees, however, renewed the action last Monday morning. Hunger strikes were reported this week also at the Villawood Immigration Detention Centre in Sydney and the Brisbane Immigration Transit Accommodation facility in Queensland.

The striking detainees describe their living conditions as “worse than a prison.” They have small rations of food, which they say is “awful,” and are denied second portions.

The inmates are locked inside their rooms between midnight and 7 a.m. They sleep on metal bunks and have only metal chairs.

MITA, in the northwestern Melbourne suburb of Broadmeadows, was built in 2008. It is Australia’s newest detention facility, staffed by private contractor Serco.

The hunger strike began after a video shot at MITA’s South compound showed a detainee being set upon by five guards and dragged out of the mess hall. His fellow detainees said he had asked for garlic with his food. Another prisoner who tried to intervene in defence of his friend was forcibly restrained by three guards and dragged from the room.

In 2017, the government’s own Australian Human Rights Commission reported that guards used excessive restraints at MITA. The commission also condemned the limited space and privacy at MITA.

Despite a blackout of their struggle by the Australian corporate media, detainees have spoken out about the conditions they face.

Issa Andrwas, a Jordanian detainee at Yongah Hill, told the New Zealand *Newshub* website: The “hunger strike, we have been doing it since Monday, we’ve started losing weight because we’re having only water.”

Andrwas said the strikers feared reprisals. He said: “Anyone who’s protesting, they’re gonna ship to different centres, and we’re not getting visas, because we’re showing the world what’s been happening in here.”

Yongah Hill detainee Lee Barber, originally from New Zealand but who has been living in Australia for 45 years, told Television New Zealand (TVNZ) that detainees want their freedom. He did not know how long he could continue the strike saying: “There’s been no medical come around.”

Paula Maka Smith, another New Zealander at Yongah Hill, told *Newshub*: “All races all together, you know. We’re all here together. The system has failed us.”

The Department of Home Affairs blithely denies that any hunger strikes have occurred. An Australian Border Force spokesperson last week claimed there was “no mass hunger strike.” Rather, “some detainees are refusing to attend regular meal times as part of a protest,” but “they continue to eat and drink in other parts of the facility.”

Many of the detainees are refugees who fled US-led and Australian-backed wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East. Others have escaped persecution by

Australian-supported regimes in Sri Lanka and elsewhere. Most spend years at the detention centres waiting for their visa applications to be approved, or for deportation after their visas have been cancelled.

Some who have taken part in the hunger strikes have lived in Australia for decades. They are victims of a “visa crackdown” by the Liberal-National Coalition government with the full support of the Labor Party opposition.

The Coalition and Labor passed changes to the Migration Act in 2014 allowing non-citizens, including permanent residents, to be deported if convicted of crimes that carry a maximum sentence of 12 months or more.

A number of those targeted are New Zealand citizens who have lived in Australia for most of their lives.

The 12-month figure is cumulative. People who have been convicted during their lifetime of minor offences potentially carrying a combined sentence of 12 months’ imprisonment can be deported. In some cases, visas have been cancelled for traffic offences.

The Coalition government boasts that it has cancelled 4,150 visas since 2014, compared with 582 cancellations between 2009 and 2013.

In a media release last year, Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton and Immigration Minister David Coleman foreshadowed a further amendment to the Migration Act, expected to be passed in parliament’s first sitting period of 2019.

The release was laced with xenophobia, declaring: “Foreign nationals who think they can flout our laws and harm Australian citizens should expect to have their visa cancelled.”

The deportation measures have been linked to the racist campaign against African youth, based on bogus claims of an “African gangs crisis” in Melbourne. Earlier this month, the *Australian* reported a marked increase in the number of Sudanese nationals having their visas cancelled in the past two years.

All the official parliamentary parties promote anti-immigrant prejudice to divide the working class and divert attention from their own responsibility for the deepening social crisis confronting millions of people.

Labor and the trade unions seek to blame “foreign workers” for the growth of unemployment and poverty that is the result of their decades-long imposition of pro-business policies.

Labor has played a central role in the persecution of refugees. In 1992, the federal Labor government of Paul Keating introduced mandatory detention for all asylum-seekers who arrive by boat. In 2012, the Greens-backed Labor government of Julia Gillard reopened the concentration camps on Nauru and Manus Island and decreed that the refugees imprisoned there would never be allowed into Australia.

The only alternative to the nationalist poison being promoted by the political and media establishment is the fight for the unity of all workers in a common struggle against the source of the deepening social crisis: the capitalist profit system.

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