

Australian government refuses to allow Tamil refugee family to return to Biloela

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Despite a powerful response by thousands of people to the determined campaign spearheaded by the working-class community of Biloela, the Liberal-National Coalition government yesterday refused to permit a Tamil refugee family to return to the town to live.

Instead, the Murugappan family will be subjected to “community detention” in Perth, on the other side of the continent, denied visas and work rights, and under continued threat of deportation back to Sri Lanka where they fear persecution.

Knowing it has the bipartisan backing of the Labor Party opposition, Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s government declared that to grant the family visas would violate the anti-refugee regime, erected by the last Labor government, which bars any asylum seeker arriving by boat from ever settling in Australia.

After dragging Nades and Priya Murugappan and their two infant girls out of Biloela through a terrifying pre-dawn Australian Border Force raid in March 2018, and imprisoning them for more than three years, the government is determined to prevent them from being reunited with the people of the Queensland town, which is a regional coal-mining centre.

Immigration Minister Alexander Hawke declared that the decision to relocate the family to Perth from the remote Indian Ocean detention facility on Christmas Island “does not create a pathway to a visa.” He reiterated the ban, first imposed by the Gillard and Rudd Labor governments in 2012–13: “Anyone who arrives in Australia illegally by boat will not be resettled permanently. Anyone who is found not to be owed protection will be expected to leave Australia.”

By moving the family to Perth, the government hopes to deflect the widespread public outrage over the treatment of Tharnicaa, the family’s youngest daughter,

who last weekend turned four. She was flown to Perth with a life-threatening blood condition early last week, only after suffering for ten days from septicaemia due to untreated pneumonia.

While accompanied by her mother, Priya, she was separated from her father, Nades and five-year-old sister Kopika, who were initially forced to remain in the notorious immigration prison on Christmas Island, more than 3,000 kilometres off the Australian mainland.

The “Home to Bilo” fight launched in 2018 by the residents of Biloela and the immense support it has generated demolish the myth, long peddled by the media and parliamentary establishment, that the cruel bipartisan treatment of asylum seekers enjoys broad public support.

Biloela is a working-class heartland, surrounded by coal mining operations, and less than an hour’s drive from Moura, where a 1994 mine explosion claimed the lives of 11 workers. Biloela has the third largest abattoir in Queensland, which employs hundreds of immigrant workers, including Nades before his arrest in 2018. It also hosts one of the state’s biggest power stations, Callide.

The plight of the Murugappan family is only in the news because of the protracted campaign by the people of Biloela, who have won mass support by organising demonstrations and vigils in the town and right across the country, and raising funds to pay for legal appeals against visa denials.

But the government’s defiance points to the danger of any illusions that popular pressure will force a change of policy by the ruling establishment. While Labor and Greens politicians have declared their support for the family, they too remain firmly wedded to the underlying national-based “border protection”

regime.

Deputy Labor leader Richard Marles, speaking to *Sky News* this morning, emphasised Labor's "absolute" support for the policy, which he said would not be "altered" by a Labor government. Marles stuck to the line that the inhuman treatment of refugees is justified because it "deters" others from thinking of fleeing to Australia to seek protection.

The anti-refugee rhetoric did not start with the current government. It originated with the Keating Labor government. In 1992, Labor set a global precedent by introducing mandatory detention for all refugees, including children, who arrived by boat.

This paved the way for the Howard Coalition government's brutal "Pacific Solution," introduced in 2001, which transported asylum seekers to prison camps in Nauru and Papua New Guinea. The Rudd and Gillard governments went further. They reopened the offshore camps and declared that detainees would remain there indefinitely, unless they returned to the country they had fled, or another government accepted them.

In 2012, Gillard agreed with Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse to return all Sri Lankan asylum seekers who reached Australia by boat. As a result, at least 700 were quickly deported, despite reports that they were immediately arrested and some tortured or "disappeared."

Greens leader Adam Bandt has blamed the Liberal-National Coalition and Labor for the Tamil family's imprisonment. Yet the Greens propped up the minority Labor government from 2010 to 2013, as Tamil refugees were removed, and thousands of asylum seekers were imprisoned indefinitely offshore. While the Greens feign sympathy for refugees, they are just as committed to maintaining the national framework that bars entry to asylum seekers.

The fate of the Murugappan family is bound up with that of the more than 80 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, fleeing repression, poverty and climate-related disasters—a refugee crisis eclipsing that caused by World War II.

Their futures cannot be left in the hands of the very governments and capitalist elites responsible for this crisis. While presiding over the wars, economic disasters and staggering social inequality that forces people to flee, the ruling class and its political

establishment vilifies refugees, trying to make them scapegoats for the deteriorating living conditions of workers at home.

Following the lead of the Biloela residents, workers and youth everywhere must take up the fight to free, not just this family, but every asylum seeker worldwide. This struggle must be linked with the demand that all people, regardless of their background, have the basic democratic right to live and work wherever they want in the world with full civil and social rights. Only the unified struggle of the international working class, directed against the capitalist system of national borders, can free refugees worldwide.



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