

Protests across Australia demand freedom for persecuted Tamil refugee family

Our reporters
21 June 2021

On Saturday, protests were held in all of Australia's capital cities to demand freedom for the Murugappan Tamil refugee family and their return to Biloela, the central Queensland town where they lived and worked before being snatched away by immigration authorities.

The rallies followed mass outrage over the treatment of the youngest family member, four-year-old Tharnicaa. She was medevacked to Perth for treatment earlier this month, but only after developing sepsis due to untreated pneumonia.

For ten days prior, she had been growing more and more ill at the notorious Christmas Island immigration detention centre in the Indian Ocean, where her family was imprisoned.

A more than three-year campaign for the family's freedom has been waged by the residents of Biloela since the family was taken in a pre-dawn raid in March 2018. They have demanded that the government free the family with full rights.

Immigration minister Alex Hawke has refused these widespread demands. Instead, last week he flew the rest of the family to Perth. They are to remain in so-called community detention, where they are banned from working, denied visas, cannot have overnight visitors, and could be deported to Sri Lanka at any time.

At the protests, Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaigners explained that Hawke's callous declaration was in line with the reactionary "border protection" framework supported by the entire political establishment.

While Labor politicians have shed crocodile tears over the plight of the Murugappan family, they have stressed their support for the immigration regime, which illegally bars refugees from seeking asylum. The last Greens-backed Labor government expanded the decades-long persecution of refugees, including by returning Tamil asylum-seekers to Sri Lanka, where they faced persecution.

No official politicians spoke at the rallies in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne. Instead, the platform included a variety of "community leaders" and representatives of the pseudo-left run Refugee Action Coalition (RAC). Most of

the speakers encouraged participants to direct futile appeals for "compassion" to the government, even after Hawke's latest declaration.

SEP campaigners explained that his statements, and those by Labor representatives defending "border protection," demonstrated that the rights of refugees could only be secured through an independent political movement of the working class, directed against capitalism and its nation-state system.

In Brisbane the main speaker was Simone Cameron, a former Biloela school teacher. She strongly condemned the government's decision to impose community detention on the family in Perth, on the other side of the continent from their home in Biloela, urging people to "push forward" to demand their freedom.

Speaking to the WSWWS after the rally, **Cameron** said the event sent a message that "we are not going to give up" until the family is released to return to Biloela. She said the support for the family over the previous week had shown that the propaganda used by successive governments and the media to justify the anti-refugee policy "won't work anymore."

Greg, a former public servant, referred to government claims that there are no longer any refugee children incarcerated in immigration facilities: "No children in detention—what a lie that is!"

Greg noted: "This policy is bipartisan. The whole situation with refugees is a disgrace. We have been protesting about this for years. And the same on Julian Assange! How long are they going to leave him locked up, rotting away? It is the same bipartisan line-up."

Caroline, his daughter, added: "This is Australia treating innocent people worse than criminals. That poor little girl [Tharnicaa] has spent four years locked up."

Greg said that the determined stand taken by the people of Biloela was "representative of working-class people. We've stayed in Biloela a few times on trips. The response there is at odds with what the newspapers say about working class people."

Greg stated that the plight of the Murugappan family was part of the worst global refugee situation since World War II. “It is the ‘Western civilisation’ that’s been sticking its nose in and creating the refugee crises or has laid down the foundations for them a century or so back with colonisation. Then they wash their hands of the victims.”

Jean, an allied health worker, who assists children that have experienced severe trauma, spoke about the long-term damage done to the Murugappan children by their protracted incarceration.

“We know that trauma affects a child’s development in terms of their sensory system,” Jean said. “They are always in flight or fright and that impacts on their learning and their capacity to express themselves. It should not happen to any child and when it’s avoidable we should do something about it.”

Jean gave a revealing indication of the indifference of the political establishment. “We have got to keep at it. We’ve had a little bit of progress but it’s not enough... My kids and I write a letter every week to every politician. Only probably about 15 percent get back to us, but that’s better than it was before last week.

“Both the major parties are the same, so maybe we need to get the Greens in, or someone else. The Biloela community has shown the response of ordinary people.”

In Melbourne, **Jessie**, who attended with her family, said. “My daughter’s friend spent five years on Nauru [one of Australia’s offshore refugee prisons] with her family. It was hot all the time, 40 plus degrees. They lived in tents. The ground was gravel so it would absorb the heat in the day and radiate it at night, so they got no break from the heat at all.”

Her friend’s daughter, now 12-years-old, is only beginning to learn to read. “It’s appalling, now they’re in community detention. Even Labor says they should have third country settlement, which itself is rubbish,” Jesse stated.

She said the family will soon be sent to the US as part of the Australian government’s brutal US resettlement deal. “They were friends with another family they met on Nauru who were sent to America last year. They’re still prepared to send people there while the pandemic is rife in America,” Jesse explained.

She concluded: “Labor wants to get rid of them as much as the Liberal-Nationals. The Biloela family should stay. They should be compensated for all the years that have been stolen from them and for the toll on their mental and physical health. They should just be left alone to live.”

Rose, a retired teacher, said popular support for the Murugappan family had disrupted the plans of the government “to hide them away. They were hoping they could fly them back to Sri Lanka without all the fuss”

Fearing for the family’s future if they are deported, Rose said she “saw an interview with someone who had been sent back to Sri Lanka and he’s basically begging on the streets. When he was in Australia he was working, paying tax, now he’s over there as a beggar.”

Stuart pointed to the costs associated with the family’s incarceration. “\$50 million has been spent by this government on Christmas Island and keeping this family locked-up,” he noted. “You’ve got four people here, ready-made migrants, two of them born here, so stop spending dough on trying to kick them out. Biloela wants them, they’re part of the community”

“If it wasn’t for the change in law back in the 80s [denying birthplace citizenship] those two girls would be citizens anyway.” Stuart said. “If you take the UN Declaration of Human Rights, it’s a fundamental right of anyone on the planet to seek asylum anywhere. I honestly don’t think it matters, Liberal or Labor, they’re tarred with the same brush.”

Sara, a retired teacher, condemned government claims that the family were “economic refugees.” These assertions were “based on lies” and “if they returned to Sri Lanka terrible things might happen to them,” she said.

“There has been terrible damage done to those children, and there are so many faceless people locked away in detention,” Sara added. “It is just so cruel and inhumane. On Manus [Island] there are so many people psychologically damaged. They are damaged forever.”

Jacob, a Year 11 high school student from Werribee, in Victoria, explained: “This is my first rally. I’m from India and this hit home. I know that Australia has been doing this for a long time now. First there was racism, the White Australia policy and now it’s just the normal thing in politics. All the political parties are moving rightwards. It’s illogical to do this, to make refugees live in a cycle of turmoil.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact