

Twenty years after Australia turned away the Tampa refugees

Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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This week marked twenty years since Australia's infamous Tampa refugee affair.

The Liberal-National Coalition Howard government, fully backed by the Labor Party opposition, barred entry to more than 400 asylum seekers, mostly from Afghanistan, who had been rescued from a sinking boat by the captain and crew of the Tampa, a Norwegian container ship.

Defying the protests of the Tampa's captain and the refugees themselves, the government dispatched Special Air Service (SAS) commandos to board the Tampa and block the rescued people from landing on Christmas Island, an Australian outpost in the Indian Ocean. It then forcibly transported them thousands of kilometres in a naval ship to the far-distant island state of Nauru. This launched what became known as the "Pacific solution," consisting of cruel indefinite detention on remote islands.

We are republishing below the statement issued by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) on August 31, 2001 unequivocally condemning this action and demanding that the refugees be brought to Australia, and that all people have the fundamental democratic right to settle, live, work and study in any part of the world of their choosing.

The "criminal act of inhumanity" committed by the Australian political establishment, in violation of international refugee law, became another turning point in the brutal treatment of asylum seekers globally, causing the loss of untold tens of thousands of lives—from the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea, and the US-Mexico border. An estimated 8,000 died in the first half of 2021 alone.

The most immediate victims were the 353 refugees who drowned on October 19, 2001 trying to reach Australia on a boat known only as SIEV X (Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel 10).

In Australia, successive governments have since intensified the anti-refugee policy. It was taken to a new level by the Greens-backed Rudd and Gillard Labor governments of 2007 to 2013, which reopened the notorious detention camps on Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island and declared that no asylum seeker trying to reach Australia by boat would ever be permitted to live in the country.

Worldwide, the number of people fleeing persecution, oppression, impoverishment and military conflicts has more than doubled since 2001, now totaling 82.4 million according to the UN, and the levels of social and economic inequality, accelerated by the COVID-19 disaster, have soared far beyond those recorded in the SEP statement.

Yet governments, especially in the so-called advanced countries, have followed the precedent set by the Tampa operation. They have resorted to ever-more repressive methods to shut borders, repel refugee boats, lock up refugees, including children, and deport asylum seekers to face suffering and death. This underscores the indictment of global capitalism made in the SEP statement.

Why the Tampa refugees should be free to live in Australia

By Socialist Equality Party (Australia)

31 August 2001

The Socialist Equality Party emphatically condemns the Howard government's refusal to allow 460 refugees on board the Norwegian freighter Tampa landing rights on Christmas Island and free entry to Australia.

The government's position, supported to the hilt by the Labor Party opposition, is a criminal act of inhumanity.

It brings to mind the infamous voyage of the St Louis in 1939 when 937 Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution in Europe were refused entry to both Cuba and the United States and were returned to Belgium, which was shortly to be occupied by Nazi forces.

The Cuban president of the time, Federico Bru, expressed his concern for "humanitarian considerations" and the "pitiable situation" of the refugees but denied them entry on the grounds that their return to Hitler's Germany was "the lesser of two evils".

In denying access to the Tampa refugees, Howard echoed Bru's insistence on the paramount importance of national sovereignty, declaring that "whilst this is a humanitarian decent country we are not a soft touch and we are not a nation whose sovereign rights in relation to who comes here are going to be trampled on".

The Howard government's actions are the culmination of a decade of increasing vilification and repression of asylum seekers. Locked up in virtual concentration camps upon their arrival, they have been branded as "illegals," akin to criminals. Every action to protest against their inhuman treatment has been met with increased repression, while successive governments have used every resource—legal, political and economic—to try to whip up public opinion against them.

Since taking office in 1996, the Howard government has enjoyed the full backing of the Labor Party, which initiated the forced detention of asylum seekers in 1992, and whose leader Kim Beazley declared his full support to the denial of entry for the Tampa refugees deeming it "appropriate and in conformity with international law".

The government's campaign against refugees, waged in the name of defending the "national interest", has inevitably recalled the White Australia policy, which formed the central plank of both major parties for the majority of the 20th century.

Already confronted by a powerful and growing working class at the end of the 19th century, the Australian bourgeoisie could not appeal to democratic ideals as it sought to forge an independent nation lest these ideals became the basis for a social movement challenging the private ownership of property. Accordingly it forged a nationalist ideology based on fear: the necessity for the protection of a white enclave within a hostile Asian environment.

At the beginning of the 21st century, Prime Minister Howard revives this outlook as he seeks to play upon the economic and social insecurities generated by his own policies and invokes the "national interest" against refugees.

The on-going bipartisan campaign against asylum seekers and the

attempt to create a pogrom-like atmosphere against them raises a basic question: What is their crime?

It is merely that they have sought to flee life-threatening persecution and repression, economic deprivation and poverty and to bring themselves and their families to a safe and secure environment. This must be surely the most basic right of any individual. Yet in seeking to exercise it, they have come face to face with the Australian army.

In opposing the Howard government's response and demanding the immediate right of entry for the Tampa refugees, the SEP bases itself on one overriding principle.

There must be an inalienable democratic right of all people, whatever their birthplace, to settle, live, work and study in any part of the world of their choosing.

Every government around the world, and not least the Howard regime, accepts as a fundamental principle the right of capital to move freely all over the globe in accordance with the logic of the "free market." Capital must be free and money must be accepted everywhere as a corporate "global citizen." Moreover, the wealthy have the right to live where they choose. But this right is denied to working people.

Howard has made clear that for the government the central issue is the defence of the national state. "We cannot surrender our right as a sovereign country to control our borders," he said, "and we cannot have a situation where people can come to this country when they choose."

No third way

Here the issue is squarely posed: either defence of the unfettered democratic right of people to move anywhere in the world, or the defence of the right of the national state to impose restrictions and exclude them. There is no third way.

This can be seen by examining the positions of some of Howard's critics, in particular the Greens and Australian Democrats. These parties are not motivated by a defence of the right of immigrants to live where they choose. Rather, they are voicing the concern of sections of the ruling class itself that the government's actions are damaging the Australia's international profile and its strategic interests in the Asia-Pacific region.

Democrats leader Natasha Stott Despoja has called the government's actions "contemptible", "inhumane" and "irresponsible" and demanded that the government review its decision. The refugees should at least be "assessed as asylum seekers under our international obligations," she declared.

Greens Senator Bob Brown said the whole world was "looking on in astonishment as this wonderful country of ours, this rich country of ours, says no to 400 people who are in clear distress on the high seas, right at our back door".

But for the Democrats and the Greens, immigration is conditional. Both parties oppose free entry as an unfettered democratic right. According to the Australian Democrats' latest policy statement, the party stands for "a non-discriminatory immigration program, which gives priority to refugees and family reunion, the total number of which, when included with overall population trends, will not impede sustainability of the nation's natural resources."

The Greens' policy is similar. They maintain that immigration policy must be set within the framework of a broader population policy that takes account of "our need to achieve our own social, economic and environmental sustainability". The Greens' program also recognises that "governments have a legitimate right to detain unauthorised arrivals while their bona fides are established".

While the Democrats and Greens oppose the government's actions in this case, and argue for a more "humane" refugee policy, they stand with Howard on one overriding principle: that at some point the state must set limits to the inflow of immigrants. The inexorable logic of their position is that if those limits are threatened, the armed forces must be called in to enforce them.

The SEP bases its position on a completely opposed principle: the right of people to free movement all over the world. The inevitable conclusion flowing from this internationalist principle is the following: If the present economic and social order is unable to accommodate those who want to immigrate, then it must be changed.

The basic doctrine of the Democrats and Greens is that the right to entry must be restricted because, in the final analysis, there are insufficient resources, either economic or natural, to accommodate all those who would seek to migrate.

This position has deep historical roots in the ideology of the capitalist social order. At the beginning of the 19th century in Britain, the Reverend Thomas Malthus denied the possibility of human progress and sought to obscure the root cause of the social ills produced by the developing capitalist system by arguing that there were "too many people" and the "breeding" of the poor had to be restricted.

Those who today oppose the unfettered right of free movement of immigrants on the grounds that resources are limited repeat this argument: that excess populations, not the economic order of capitalism, are the foundation of social problems.

Such arguments seek to obscure the real situation: that the source of all wealth and social progress is the labour, both physical and intellectual, of the working people.

A broader global process

The Tampa crisis is only the latest expression of a broader global process. All over the world, capitalist governments are denying the right of entry to refugees and immigrants on the grounds that there is no room, and economic resources are limited.

Consequently, as many as 40 million refugees are denied safe haven, most of them languishing in squalid camps in impoverished countries, and 150 million working people now lead a semi-legal half-existence subjected to the most terrible forms of exploitation and state repression, while being denied basic democratic rights. What an indictment of the global capitalist system!

Amid the vast advances in the spheres of technology and productive capacity the capitalist ruling classes, with their system of nation-states, borders, passports and visas have turned the world into a prison for hundreds of millions of people.

Controls on migration are generally accepted as a given "fact of life". But it should be recalled that they did not exist at the turn of last century. The paraphernalia of passports, rules and regulations was only introduced to prevent the movement of workers around the world, and reinforce the nationalist ideology with which every capitalist government sought to cement its hold on political power.

In 1990, launching the war against Iraq, US president George Bush declared it was aimed at securing a "new world order". Barely a decade on, the real face of the "new order" of global capitalism stands exposed.

The world-wide movement of refugees, displaced people and so-called "illegal" immigrants is one of its products, spawned by the innumerable wars, civil wars, ethnic conflicts and economic deprivation to which it has given rise.

The deepening social and economic inequality that lies at the heart of the refugee crisis, is spelt out in the language of hard statistics. Situated at the apex of the global capitalist system, the world's richest 200 people saw their combined income double between 1994 and 1998 to more than \$1 trillion—equivalent to about one fortieth of global gross domestic product. The world's three richest people have assets greater than the combined output of the 48 poorest countries.

In 1999 the United Nations *World Development Report* estimated that for an expenditure of \$40 billion—a mere fraction of the income of the top 200—basic health, water sanitation, education and nutrition could be provided for the entire world's population.

What these figures, and many others like them, reveal is that the global

refugee crisis, of which the Tampa standoff is the latest terrible expression, is the product of the decaying social order of global capitalism.

The only answer of the ruling classes to the crisis, which their social system has produced, is the imposition of ever-greater forms of repression. While the Australian government is seeking to appeal to a “national interest,” working people have common class interests with the refugees, not Howard. They have the same basic needs and aspirations as those seeking to escape oppression and exploitation worldwide—decent living standards, social services, democratic rights and social equality.

Internationally, the working class must advance on a new road. The planet must be made a fit place in which all can live and work in common decency, free from all political and economic repression. The present social system, based on the accumulation of private profit in the interests of capital, must be overturned and a new one constructed in which the vast productive resources created by the labour of the world’s producers are used to meet human need.

It is on the basis of this perspective that the SEP opposes the brutal actions of the Howard government and demands immediate and unrestricted entry for the Tampa refugees.



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