

The inhuman treatment of refugees and Australia's anti-democratic electoral laws

Max Boddy**19 November 2021**

One of the burning issues that continues to cause widespread disgust among ordinary working people in Australia is the brutal treatment of asylum seekers by successive governments, both Liberal-National and Labor.

Recent developments in Australia and internationally have further exposed the inhumanity of the anti-refugee regime. This is another factor in the bipartisan passage of new electoral laws designed to stifle opposition to the entire political establishment that is responsible for the barbaric repression of desperate people fleeing persecution and destitution.

Last month, there was another damning verdict on Australia's cruel regime. A coroner ruled there was a 95 percent chance that Omid Masoumali, a 23-year-old Iranian asylum seeker, who died from self-immolation on April 26, 2016, would have survived had he been transferred more quickly to an Australian hospital.

Masoumali was being held in Australia's immigration prison on the small island nation of Nauru. It took the government nearly 30 hours to transfer him after he had suffered burns to more than 57 percent of his body. He had poured petrol and lit himself on fire, telling those watching: "This is how tired we are, this action will prove how exhausted we are. I cannot take it anymore."

Masoumali was one of three people in an eight-month period who died from self-immolation to protest the "border protection" regime that deports or imprisons indefinitely any asylum seeker trying to reach Australia by boat.

Today millions of refugees worldwide are being subjected to vicious measures. On the Poland-Belarus border, thousands of refugees are being repelled by troops and barbed wire, and used as instruments of the European Union (EU) and NATO to threaten war with

Russia. Thousands more continue to drown in the Mediterranean Sea, or risk their lives trying to enter the US, only to be blocked or imprisoned.

Australia's ruling elite bears a direct responsibility for these policies, which all take their precedents from the "mandatory detention" imposed by the Keating Labor government in the 1990s and the total denial of refugee settlement introduced by one Coalition and Labor government after another since 2001.

All these measures violate the 1951 Refugee Convention, which established the basic right to flee from persecution, free from punishment or the threat of forced return.

The lie that these policies enjoy popular support has been shattered whenever the human realities are brought to light.

That is proven by the case of the Murugappan family of Nades, Priya and their two daughters, six-year-old Kopika and four-year-old Tharnicaa. Refugees from Sri Lanka, they were snatched from their home in Biloela, central Queensland, in a pre-dawn raid by the paramilitary Border Force in March 2018.

Thanks to the tireless efforts of the residents of Biloela, they have become a household name. The "Home to Bilo" campaign has won support across the country, with multiple protests held in all the capital cities and major rural towns calling for the family's release.

The stand taken by the workers and professionals of Biloela has given voice to the deep hostility to both major political parties. Significantly, Biloela is a working-class community, based on coal miners, power station workers and abattoir workers.

Despite this powerful campaign, the Morrison government continues to deny the family the right to return to Biloela. After prolonged detention on remote

Christmas Island in the Indian Ocean, they remain in “community detention” in Perth, some 3,500 kilometres from their home.

While one or another Labor or Green politician may posture in defence of the family, they all fundamentally agree with the “border protection” regime, which was pioneered by Keating’s Labor government, the first in the world to detain all refugees who arrived by boat.

In 2001, this was deepened by the Howard Coalition government’s “Pacific Solution,” which transported asylum seekers to brutal prison camps on Nauru and Manus Island, in Papua New Guinea. The Rudd and Gillard Labor governments of 2007 to 2013 went further. After reopening the offshore camps, they declared that all asylum seekers would remain detained indefinitely, unless they returned to the country they fled, or were accepted by another government.

In 2012, Gillard struck an agreement with Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse to return all Sri Lankan asylum seekers who reached Australia by boat. At least 700 were quickly deported, with reports surfacing that they were immediately arrested and some tortured or “disappeared.”

While the Greens posture as refugee advocates, they propped up Gillard’s minority government and are looking to form another Labor-Greens government after the upcoming federal election.

No appeal can be made to these parties. Their policies flow inexorably from the nation-state system, in which the capitalist profit system is embedded. While asylum seekers are locked out, big business and the wealthy elites are free to move around the world, scouring the globe for cheaper labour and lower taxes.

That is why the Socialist Equality Party explains that workers and youth must defend the basic rights of asylum seekers as an essential part of the necessary struggle to unify the working class internationally to overturn the capitalist system itself. All workers, no matter their background, must have the basic right to live and work wherever they choose around the world, with full citizenship rights.

It is this perspective that the government is attempting to prevent being brought to the next election. In August, the Liberal-National Coalition, fully backed by Labor, rushed through anti-democratic electoral laws to force all parties without members of parliament to submit a list of 1,500 members—treble the

previous number—by December 2 or face deregistration.

Labor, Liberal and the Greens are increasingly discredited in the eyes of thousands of workers for their record on the inhuman treatment of refugees. The laws are an attempt to prevent this opposition from finding a clear and conscious political expression.

Support our campaign against these anti-democratic laws and join the fight to defeat them. Assist us in advancing our socialist perspective by signing up as an electoral member today.



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