

The 2022 Australian election and the bipartisan assault on refugees

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The 2022 Australian federal election is one of the most right-wing election campaigns in the country's history. There is not a sliver of difference between the Coalition Liberal-National government and the Labor opposition, including on the decades-long bipartisan assault on refugees.

From the beginning of the campaign, Labor leader Anthony Albanese stated that the party's position is "very clear—we support boat turnbacks." That is the brutal policy of the Coalition, which utilises the Australian navy to seize refugee vessels and force them back the way they came, regardless of the danger to lives on the high seas.

Albanese also committed to maintain the "offshore detention facilities" in the Pacific, where refugees are imprisoned indefinitely in conditions likened to concentration camps on the tiny island nation of Nauru and Manus Island in Papua New Guinea. He tried to outdo the Coalition by vowing to deny asylum seekers who got to Australia any visas, not even the government's temporary protection visas.

Only the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) stands in this election advancing a socialist and internationalist perspective for all workers, including asylum seekers, to be able to live and work anywhere in the world with full citizenship rights.

This issue cannot be separated from the building of a genuine international anti-war movement. The global refugee crisis, the greatest since World War II, is being fuelled by 30 years of unending war, led by the United States and supported by its allies, including Australia.

The people fleeing their countries and seeking asylum are either direct or indirect victims of these wars. Just as in both world wars, an even greater crisis is building today as the US-NATO war against Russia, via the proxy war in the Ukraine, is setting the stage for World War III, with potentially catastrophic nuclear consequences.

The assault on refugees is bound up with the attacks on

the democratic rights of the working class as a whole. The same methods of indefinite imprisonment and deportation can and will be turned against workers and youth as the capitalist crisis deepens and social conditions worsen, fuelling discontent, strikes and struggles.

This process of widening such measures has begun with the deportation of permanent residents who are not Australian citizens, for minor crimes under section 501 of the Migration Act. As amended in 2014, this gives the government the power to revoke the visa of anyone convicted of crimes that carry a cumulative sentence of more than a year in prison, irrespective of the nature of the offence.

What began with asylum seekers is being extended to key sections of the working class. Thousands of New Zealand citizens, who make up the majority of permanent residents in Australia, have been deported. Many are Māori workers. Those deported often have been forced into destitution and homelessness.

At the same time the whipping up of anti-refugee sentiment seeks to divert social tensions outward. Under conditions of historic low levels of support for the major parties, Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced last week a new six-point "border protection" policy, which includes those being deported under section 501 being charged for their imprisonment in detention centres.

The Labor opposition gave tacit support for this brutal policy change. Shadow education minister Tanya Plibersek said Labor was "happy to look at any sensible proposal."

This should come as no surprise. This is stock-in-trade of Labor and the trade unions, which push xenophobic rhetoric to scapegoat foreign workers for supposedly taking "Aussie jobs" and deflect from their own role in implementing wage cuts, destruction of jobs and conditions, and transfer of wealth to the rich.

Knowing how hated these draconian refugee policies

have become, Albanese has attempted to present a figleaf of compassion by saying Labor would release a family of Tamil refugees who have been imprisoned by the government for more than four years as political pawns.

The Murugappan family had settled in the rural central Queensland town of Biloela, where Priya, the husband and father, was employed as a meat worker. On March 5, 2018, armed guards stormed the home of Priya and Nadesalingam (Nades) and their two daughters, Kopika and Tharunicaa. They have been in some form of detention ever since.

This barbarity would not have been exposed if not for the courageous and unrelenting fight of the residents of Biloela. Their campaign shot the family's plight to the attention for millions of people who have demanded the family's release through protests and petitions.

On the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Q and A" program, Albanese was asked if he were elected would he allow the family to stay in Australia. After answering in the affirmative, he reiterated Labor's unaltered hard-line stance. He said: "You can be strong on borders without being weak on humanity."

Labor's record speaks for itself. There is nothing humane about the anti-refugee policies it has pioneered. In 1992, the Keating Labor government introduced the mandatory detention of all refugees—men, women and children—who arrived by boat to Australia.

The 2007-2013 Rudd and Gillard Labor governments went further. After reopening the offshore refugee prison camps, they decreed those detainees would be imprisoned indefinitely unless they returned to the country they fled, or another country agreed to take them. Labor also declared that any asylum seeker who got to Australia by boat would never be allowed to settle.

The Labor government deported Sri Lankan refugees back to Colombo in an agreement with Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse. This resulted in the immediate deportation of 700 asylum seekers. Some were immediately arrested, tortured or "disappeared."

It is precisely these Labor policies that created the conditions for the persecution of the Tamil family from Biloela. Even if Albanese's promise for settlement is fulfilled, which is wholly unguaranteed, it will resolve nothing for the thousands of other refugee families stranded, fleeing for safety or imprisoned.

The Australian Greens claim to represent a more compassionate approach. Yet they are responsible for the inhuman policies carried out by the last Labor government, which the Greens kept in office from 2010 to

2013. The Greens supplied the required parliamentary numbers for the minority government to survive, even as men, women and children were locked up on Nauru and Manus Island.

No appeals to capitalist governments to show "compassion" will change the repressive asylum seeker policies. They flow inexorably from the nation-state system in which the private profit system is embedded. While capitalism imprisons refugees, the opposite applies to investors and the wealthy elites. They are free to roam the world in search of cheap labour to exploit.

Workers and youth must defend the basic rights of asylum seekers. As the SEP's election statement explains: "The unification of the working class is the essential means to halt the drive to war, eliminate COVID-19 or arrest climate change. To unify workers, all forms of racism and nationalism must be rejected, and the persecution of refugees and immigrants opposed."

This is an essential part of the necessary struggle to unify the working class internationally to overturn the capitalist system in which the profit-driven nation-state system is rooted.

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