

Australian Labor government grants Tamil refugee family only insecure bridging visas

Max Boddy
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As one of its first acts, the new Australian Labor government has refused the Murugappan Tamil refugee family permanent residency, instead granting insecure temporary bridging visas.

While this means that the family can soon return to Biloela, the Queensland regional working-class town whose residents led the fight for their freedom, the threat of deportation still hangs over them.

This cynical political stunt is designed to create a gloss on Labor's deepening of the bipartisan persecution of refugees, which the Keating Labor government initiated in the 1990s by introducing mandatory detention of all asylum seekers arriving by boat.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese on Saturday refused to answer questions about whether the government would grant the family permanent protection visas or residency. That is despite the government having the power to do so immediately via ministerial discretion.

The temporary visas mean the family has limited rights and remain in legal limbo, with the continued threat of being denied refugee status and sent back to Sri Lanka, where they would face obvious danger. Moreover, Labor is thus maintaining the inhuman "border protection" regime, so tens of thousands of other people face the same horrors.

While welcoming the government's move with relief, Priya Murugappan issued an appeal for all refugees to be protected. "My prayer is that this government will make a change to the lives of every single refugee who comes here," she said. "All refugees are survivors. They need hope."

Treasurer Jim Chalmers, the acting immigration minister, said the family would "reside lawfully in the community" while they work to resolve their

immigration status. But he emphasised: "This government remains committed to Operation Sovereign Borders."

That is the deployment of the navy to intercept refugee boats on the high seas and force them to turn back to the countries their passengers fled.

The utter hypocrisy of the government posturing around the bridging visa was underscored on Tuesday, when it utilised the navy to force a boatload of asylum seekers back to Sri Lanka.

The boat had been intercepted prior to the May 21 election. The then Prime Minister Scott Morrison publicised the naval operation through a text message to marginal seats, urging a vote for his government to supposedly protect the borders. Labor criticised this action from the right, claiming it endangered the military operation and "politicised" the bipartisan policy of repelling refugee boats.

Chalmers' reference to working "towards the resolution of their immigration status" shows the family could still be ruled "unlawful non-citizens" and deported. The father Nades, mother Priya and oldest daughter Kopika have all been refused asylum applications by the High Court. Tharnicaa, the youngest, who has spent most of her life imprisoned, was barred from even making a visa application.

The family was arrested by the paramilitary Australian Border Force (ABF) in a pre-dawn raid at their home in Biloela on March 5, 2018. Their detention would have gone unreported had it not been for the tireless efforts of Biloela residents, who have mounted a national "Home to Bilo" campaign for their release.

The previous Liberal-National Coalition government kept the family in some form of detention for more than four years, including on the notorious Christmas Island

detention centre, located on an Indian Ocean Australian outpost some 1,500 kilometres from the mainland.

The family has been languishing in “community detention” in Perth, the capital of Western Australia, since Tharnicaa, the youngest child, developed a life-threatening blood condition due to improper medical treatment.

While carried out by the Coalition, the attacks against the family were conducted under measures implemented by previous Labor governments. In 2012 the Gillard Labor government 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.”

Throughout the 2022 federal election campaign, the Socialist Equality Party called for the defence of asylum seekers as part of the fight for the unity of the international working class against the capitalist system to halt the drive to war, eliminate COVID-19 and arrest climate change. Our election statement insisted:

“To unify workers, all forms of racism and nationalism must be rejected, and the persecution of refugees and immigrants opposed. Workers must be able to live and work wherever they want with full citizenship rights.”

The Greens, who posture as refugee advocates, condemned the Labor government for turning the Sri Lankan boat back. That was, however, while pledging to restore “stability” to the political order by propping up the new government. That is in line with the Greens’ role from 2010 to 2013 in forming a de facto coalition with the Gillard government as it deported Sri Lankan refugees and reopened the “offshore” immigration prison camps on remote Pacific islands.

Labor’s commitment to “Operation Sovereign Borders” is a key plank of its right-wing agenda, which consists of lining up behind the US war drive against China, and demanding “sacrifices” from the working class.

The ongoing punitive treatment of the Murugappan family typifies the horrors inflicted on refugees across the globe. The fight for the family’s freedom, and the freedom of millions of refugees internationally, must be based on the basic right of working people to live and work wherever they choose around the world. This is

part of the common struggle against the capitalist profit system that maintains the national borders.



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