

Australia: Sri Lankan asylum seeker dies after self-immolation, amid protests against Labor's brutal anti-refugee regime

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Mano Yogalingam, a 23-year-old Sri Lankan who arrived with his family in Australia to claim asylum when he was just 11-years-old, died last Wednesday after setting himself on fire.

The horrific incident was an outcome of the cruel and unlawful policies of the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese. Yogalingam's self-immolation occurred in the southern Melbourne working class suburb of Noble Park, and followed weeks of demonstrations against the federal Labor government's draconian anti-refugee regime that he had been involved in.

Yogalingam was among around 12,000 people that have lived for a decade or more in Australia on so-called bridging and temporary visas. Many of these were issued to asylum seekers from the Middle East, Africa and South Asia, who arrived in Australia by boat in the early 2010s. During this period, the previous Rudd-Gillard Labor governments openly repudiated the international legal principle of the right to asylum, regardless of the route of entry into a given country. Refugees arriving by boat were immediately deported to camps on Christmas Island and in the South Pacific states of Nauru and Papua New Guinea—and those eventually permitted to reside in Australia have since done so effectively without any rights.

Thousands of asylum seekers have lived and grown up in Australia under the threat of imminent deportation, without access to any kind of welfare income support, Medicare or other public health access, and without their children being allowed access to university and tertiary study on the same basis as Australian nationals.

Yogalingam reportedly had his asylum application

rejected under a so-called “fast track” system introduced in 2014 by the former Liberal-National government. This system amounted to a “fast track” into limbo status, with those denied refugee status facing an undefined and indefinite threat of deportation that has now lasted a decade or more. Those subject to this brutal system includes numerous refugees who arrived in Australia as very young children and who are about to graduate high school while having none of the rights of their school friends.

The Albanese Labor government's refusal to do anything to resolve the undocumented and effectively stateless status of more than 10,000 people is another expression of its ruthless and right-wing character.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with one of the leaders of the demonstration encampment in Melbourne, **Rathy Barthlote** of the Tamil Refugee Council, shortly prior to the tragic death of Mano Yogalingam. She condemned the Labor government: “It's a game for them, they are playing with us refugees. The government at the moment is showing its face, showing what it is.”

Rathy fled Sri Lanka in 2013 and has since worked as an aged care worker, while her partner has worked two jobs to jointly support their two school-aged children in conditions of extreme insecurity. Rathy explained that she and other asylum seekers had hoped that the Labor Party's election win in May 2022 would result in a resolution of their visa statuses. In September-October last year, she and 21 other women, predominantly Tamil Sri Lankan and Iranian asylum seekers, spent nearly a month undertaking a protest march from Melbourne to Canberra, only to be rebuffed by government officials.

After that, last July, asylum seeker protestors held a health rally, a including stress, heart failure, 24-hour encampment outside the offices of the Home Affairs Department in Melbourne, with an aligned demonstration beginning shortly after in Sydney, outside the office of the Minister for Home Affairs Tony Burke. The Melbourne encampment was attacked by a group of masked neo-Nazis on August 16, which was effectively protected by police from counter-demonstrators.

Rathy said about the protest: “This is unifying Sri Lankans, Iranians, Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, and others. We are asking the community to raise their support for us. I fled to Australia as a refugee in 2013, but even now I am still on a bridging visa, which denies everything. I can’t access any healthcare; I want to do further studies, but I can’t as I have to pay tens of thousands of dollars as an international student. If I go for higher paid jobs, employers ask me what my work rights are—this blocks me from any ‘higher’ jobs in the aged care sector.”

Rathy explained that her eldest daughter had arrived in Australia as a young child, was about to graduate high school, but was only now understanding how she was legally different from her friends and classmates. Rathy’s academically qualified daughter is unable to access usually-subsidised university courses because she is only eligible for full-fee places that are typically awarded to affluent international students.

“Over the last 12 years, my family has contributed to this community very deeply; we are doing our best,” Rathy told the WSW. “My husband is an aged care worker too, and he also works another job as a warehouse forklift driver. We are hardworking people. I haven’t seen my mother in 18 years—this causes emotional trauma and stress. Yes, we are in a community—but it is an open prison, I can’t travel anywhere with the bridging visa. All of us involved in this protest have been stressed for 12 years; this is why we want an end to this uncertainty. We are just asking the government to give us permanent residency. That’s why we are here, we are here to protest peacefully.”

Several asylum seekers denied residency rights by the Labor government told WSWS reporters about the detrimental impact on their and others’ health and wellbeing.

Multiple people kept in limbo apart from their families have suffered serious mental and physical

health effects, a including stress, heart failure, depression, and anxiety. Many so-called bridging visas require regular renewal, with an ever present threat of family deportation in the event that such visas are denied. The WSWS understands that at least one family fears that their child will be deported once they turn 18 years of age, and, as a consequence, multiple family members are being monitored for fear of suicide.

Another issue is whether or not the denied asylum seekers are permitted to legally work.

One protestor in Melbourne, **Kavi**, explained that he arrived in Australia from Sri Lanka in 2012 and was previously permitted to work but that work rights were stripped three months ago for no clear reason. “I was working in a warehouse,” he said, “but now I can’t do anything, I can’t work at all. I don’t have any support from the government—there is no Centrelink, there is no Medicare, so now I am trying to just survive. I am living off my savings.”

Yogalingam’s tragic death underscores the fact that successive Australian governments, Labor and Liberal-National, have led the charge internationally in the assault on the democratic rights of asylum-seekers and refugees. Amid a drive to war and authoritarianism, this offensive is being taken up by fascist movements and governments internationally, who are scapegoating refugees for the social crisis and seeking to divide the working class along national lines.

The alternative is the fight for a unified movement of the entire working class, based on a socialist perspective. A critical element of that struggle is the defence of immigrants and refugees, based on the internationalist principle that workers have the right to live and work wherever they choose, with full citizenship rights.



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