

# Australia: Asylum seekers protesting Labor's anti-refugee policies speak to the WSWS

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Asylum seekers in Australia have held weeks of protests against the federal Labor government's draconian anti-refugee policies. They have set up 24-hour encampments outside the offices of parliamentarians in the major capital cities of Melbourne in Victoria, Sydney in New South Wales and Brisbane in Queensland, with protests also taking place in Adelaide, South Australia.

Those protesting are among some 12,000 asylum seekers who have languished in Australia for more than a decade on so-called bridging visas. These visas deny the holder basic rights to education, healthcare and working rights, depending on the visa type granted. As these visas are temporary those on them face the daily threat of deportation back to the countries they fled, where they often confront the prospect of imprisonment, torture and death.

In late August 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 after setting himself on fire. This tragedy was the direct outcome of the horrific "border protection" regime of successive Labor and Liberal governments.

In the working-class suburb of Punchbowl in Sydney the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to **Kalyiani Inpakumar** from the Tamil Refugee Council who was one of the organisers of the 24-hour encampments.

She explained that "there was a vigil started outside Clare O'Neil's office in Victoria and when Tony Burke was appointed as the minister for immigration, they called us and asked us whether we wanted to do one outside his office.

"We had a meeting, and the refugees nominated about 12 leaders from among the community to assist in running it. We are here to help but it is run by the refugees themselves. I am not a refugee, but I was. I

fled from Sri Lanka in 1983."

Kalyiani explained that "The 'fast track' system was introduced by the Liberal government in 2014 and there are 10,000 refugees who are caught up in it. Before Labor came into power, they did admit that the 'fast track' system was flawed. We are hoping that they will change it and help these refugees get permanent protection.

"The refugees feel that for the last 14 years they have been forgotten people. They are scared that if they leave this spot they will be forgotten again. So, they are going to remain here until they get permanent visas."

**Farid** has been in Australia since 2013 and hasn't seen his wife or daughter, who was 5 years old when he left. "I fled Bangladesh because there was a lot of politics, soldiers killing people. I had to leave by boat without my family. I came here for peace and safety.

"When I applied [for a visa] they gave me an interview, but with the fast-track system they divided us, sent us to the Immigration Assessment Authority (IAA) which in one week refused my case. Even now I haven't heard any news. I was in a detention centre for the first nine months, and when I was released, I had no right to work for about six or seven months."

Farid said the constant threat of deportation is "very hard for us, we don't know what is happening. Labor and Liberal they don't support us at all. They ignore everyone. So, my message is to the Australian people. If they knew about our situation, they would definitely help us. So, my message please, we are divided from our family, we live here not like a human, but like an animal. We don't get any human rights.

"Last week one of our friends, he passed away, two days ago another passed away, three years ago, one of my friends hung himself because he can't go back home. It's a prison. It's community detention, but it's

prison.”

“We are protesting because we have waited so long. When the Labor government came in, we thought it would do something for us. But we didn’t get anything. We have no choice, we must protest. That’s why we’re all fighting.”

The WSWS spoke to a **Tamil refugee** who arrived in Australia when she was only seven years old. She asked to remain anonymous. “I have been in Australia for 12 years. I arrived with my mother and brother. My mum fled to India from Sri Lanka in 2001 with my brother, that was where I was born in 2005. We had to flee to Australia because it wasn’t safe there.”

She explained that her mother made the decision because of the Sri Lankan civil war. “My mother told me there was ongoing genocide in Sri Lanka and a lot of people died. My mum saw what was happening there firsthand and, of course, didn’t feel safe. She had a one-year-old child in her hands, and she needed to look towards his future to make sure he was safe.”

The family fled to Australia by boat, in what is an extremely dangerous journey. She explained, “There was only meant to be a specific amount of people on the boat, but a lot came with us. We didn’t have enough food; we didn’t have enough water.

“We were on the other end of the boat. We couldn’t get to the front to get food or water, so whatever was passed down to us, that was all we got.”

She explained that the boat was captured by the Australian Navy, after which they were transferred to offshore detention on Christmas Island. “It was kind of like a prison,” she said. “There were specific times for meals, if you didn’t go, you wouldn’t get food. Specific times for the computer, one hour and that was it. They would come and check what time we’d sleep and if there was a curfew, we had to be in our rooms.”

The IAA initially rejected their asylum seeker claim. “We took it back to court to review our case again and last year they rejected it again and put it back to the court. Each time it goes to court, we must apply for a new bridging visa. This time, when we reapplied, immigration said that I’m not allowed to continue my education. I was doing a three-month course to get into a Bachelor of Psychology. We have full work rights, but no study rights. We can’t leave the country so when family members pass away, we can’t say our goodbyes.”

Speaking on the constant fear of deportation, she said “I can’t go back. I don’t have citizenship in Sri Lanka, India or anywhere. My mum saw everything that was happening, this government cannot assure her safety. Who knows what would happen to her if she is sent back?”

When Labor came to office in 2022, she said, “that gave us hope because Labor promised us a lot of things, that they will help refugees. But we haven’t seen any improvement, we don’t know when this is going to end. Even if the government gives permanent residency to a specific number of refugees, what about the others? Every day we wake up thinking ‘what if they send me back?’ That itself poses a lot of mental health issues.”

**Talal**, from Iraq, arrived in Australia in 2013. “I came by boat to Australia and have been here 11 years. We can’t go overseas to see our family and we don’t get Medicare. We’re not allowed to study, and we’re not allowed to do anything. When we work, if we’re allowed to work, we pay tax. I left Iraq because it wasn’t safe. Everyone in the world, they know the news in Iraq on ISIS and everything that has happened. It’s not safe. So, I came to Australia by boat.”

Explaining the journey Talal said, “it was very scary to be honest. We had no choice, we only had that way otherwise we’d die, lose our family. I already lost my mum, I’ve still got a sister over there and some family, but I’m so sad I don’t get to see them and haven’t for 13 years.”

Describing what it is like to live with the daily threat of deportation, Talal said “we are in jail. I’m married and I can’t apply for a marriage visa. I married in 2020, and it is now 2024. We need a solution from the minister. People here have left their family, their kids and wife, haven’t seen them for 13 years. It’s not easy. They have mental problems, trauma, PTSD, they can’t get NDIS [disability] support. It’s terrible.”

“The government treats us like a game of soccer, passing between Liberal and Labor. We need some good news.”



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