

Australia: Refugee prison boat cruelty highlights bipartisan scapegoating of immigrants

Mike Head, SEP candidate for the seat of Oxley
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A recent report by the Australian Ombudsman exposed the inhuman and degrading conditions in which refugees are imprisoned on military patrol boats that the Albanese Labor government uses to capture and remove them.

These operations include forcibly transporting asylum seekers to the notorious detention camp on the remote, tiny Pacific island of Nauru, which Labor reopened in 2023.

The report contained shocking pictures of the primitive, unhygienic and cramped cells in which captured refugees have been held indefinitely and at least for two weeks, forced to sleep and eat on thin floor mats, without any beds or furniture.

As the report documented, the facilities on board the Labor government's two prison vessels, the MV Besant and ADV Guidance, lack proper shelter, sleeping arrangements, sanitary conditions, dining and recreational facilities, adequate medical care and private spaces for asylum interviews.

These conditions violate both United Nations and domestic minimum standards for detention, including in relation to access to medical care, interpreters and adequate accommodation.

In the words of the report: "Within the detention area there was no furniture or beds, and we were advised that foam 'jigsaw mats' are provided to people detained within the facility [Figure 2]. These mats are approximately four centimetre thick foam mats that can be interlocked together. These mats would be placed over the plastic grate decking and people in detention would sleep, sit, and eat on these mats for the duration of their stay—which could be weeks—within the detention facility."

This "fell well short" of the UN Minimum Standard Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, which stipulate that "accommodation used by detained persons, in particular all sleeping accommodation, shall meet all requirements of health, due regard being paid to climatic conditions and particularly to cubic content of air, minimum floor space, lighting, heating and ventilation."

The Labor government has not uttered a word about the report. It is proceeding silently with plans to cosmetically upgrade the facilities on ADV Guidance. But these conditions will still be cruel. As the report noted, for example: "[T]here was no dining room in the detention area, and we were advised that meals would be prepared in the ship's kitchen, delivered to the detention area, and consumed within the accommodation area."

The report, barely mentioned in the corporate media, is another

indication of the lengths to which the Labor government is going to seek to outdo the Liberal-National Coalition in repelling and punishing asylum seekers who are trying to flee persecution and impoverishment.

Nauru, together with Papua New Guinea's Manus Island—another former Australian colony—was one of the locations for the barbaric post-2001 "Pacific Solution" of refugee detention on remote islands, perpetrated by successive Labor and Coalition governments. Under Albanese, Nauru is again housing asylum seekers in primitive conditions.

This is being accompanied by unknown numbers of forced and dangerous refugee boat "turnbacks" by naval or Australian Border Force vessels, conducted behind a wall of military secrecy.

The bipartisan war on refugees is part of a wider political offensive. It dovetails with a barrage of lies in the official campaign for the May 3 federal election, seeking to blame refugees, immigrant workers and international students for the worsening housing and cost-of-living crisis hitting millions of working-class households.

In recent weeks, both Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Coalition leader Peter Dutton have competed with each other in vowing to slash the numbers of immigrants and international students.

Dutton has declared that a Coalition government would cut net migration by 100,000 a year from the 2025–26 projected figure of 260,000, "straight away," only to be accused by Home Affairs Minister Tony Burke of proposing a lesser cut than Labor. Burke boasted that the 2025–26 figure was already a drop of 120,000 from the current year.

Likewise, Dutton has vowed to cut the number of international students entering Australia by 80,000 to 240,000, only to have Albanese condemn him for refusing to back Labor's own legislation to impose enrolment caps last year. Having failed to get that bill through the Senate, the Labor government has already drastically cut the numbers by 16 percent to 270,000 by ministerial decree.

This is despite all the evidence demolishing the bipartisan claim that international students are driving up rents. Research has shown that these students account for only 4 percent of the rental market. In fact, median weekly rent increased by 30 percent between 2019 and 2023, even when student visa arrivals decreased

by 13 percent due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The truth is that the housing affordability crisis is caused by profiteering by the banks and property developers, such as Australia's second richest oligarch Harry Triguboff (estimated to be worth \$31.48 billion), and the decimation of public housing over the past four decades, now being intensified by the demolition of 44 public housing towers in Melbourne by the Victorian state Labor government.

The student enrolment caps are ramping up the financial pressure on the chronically underfunded public universities—already triggering the destruction of more than 2,000 jobs of educators and professional staff.

More broadly, the assault on migrants is an attack on the working class as a whole, which is increasingly international in Australia, as it is around the world. Almost half the Australian population has a parent born overseas. In major working-class areas that proportion is even higher. In the Brisbane electorate of Oxley, where I am the candidate for the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), that figure is 66 percent. In the Melbourne electorate of Calwell, where Morgan Peach is our candidate, it is 72 percent!

Such working-class households are increasingly threatened by the anti-immigrant witch-hunt, which features restricting or terminating work visas, denying democratic rights such as voting and standing for election, and deporting people on temporary visas.

At the end of last year, despite popular opposition, Labor and the Coalition joined hands to pass three anti-immigrant bills. One was a potential mass deportation bill. Immigration officials admitted that more than 80,000 people on bridging or temporary visas could be expelled from the country under its provisions.

The second bill ordered migrants being expelled from the country to “cooperate in efforts to ensure their prompt and lawful removal,” or they could be imprisoned repeatedly for up to five years. The third bill provided the government the power to confiscate mobile phones from detainees, to prevent them from communicating with the outside world.

On this front, like every other, Australia is no exception to what is happening around the world. On every continent, the ruling class and its political servants are trying to divert the growing discontent with plunging living conditions away from the real source, which lies in the ever greater accumulation of wealth by the billionaires and the capitalist profit system itself.

Everywhere, now spearheaded by the fascistic Trump administration's mass deportations, the media and political establishments are seeking to whip up anti-immigrant sentiment, nationalism and patriotism to divide the working class globally, and prepare for war.

The SEP is the sole party standing candidates in this election, as part of the campaigns by our world movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International, for the opposite and only possible progressive political perspective.

The fight against the anti-refugee and anti-immigrant poison requires a mass movement of the working class globally for the expropriation of the oligarchs, the establishment of workers' power and the reorganisation of society on the basis of social need, not private profit.

Workers have to unite with their class brothers and sisters around the world in a common struggle to end capitalism and build socialism. In the famous words of the *Communist Manifesto* written by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, “Workers of the world, unite!”

That is why the SEP states clearly in our election statement: “Hands off immigrants and refugees! End the scapegoating of these oppressed workers for the social crisis caused by capitalism! Full citizenship rights for all working people now!”

Despite Labor's criminal regime, the Greens and various pseudo-left groups are urging a vote for Labor to “keep Dutton out.” But Labor's brutality is no aberration. It was founded in the 1890s on the racist White Australia policy of excluding non-European migrants. In recent decades, it has helped spearhead attacks on refugees, including the introduction of mandatory detention in 1992, and the reopening of offshore detention camps in 2012.

Since the 1990s, both Labor and Coalition governments alike have set precedents for other Western governments to shut their doors, block boats, detain asylum seekers and either return them or transport them to grim locations.

Now “foreigners,” including international students, are being falsely blamed for the deteriorating social conditions produced by capitalism's economic and cost-of-living crisis and the channelling of billions of dollars into military spending amid the US-backed Gaza genocide and the preparations for a war against China.

This is a malicious nationalist drive to turn working people against each other, domestically and globally. To defeat it means forging the international unity of working people in the common struggle against capitalism and for socialism. That is what the SEP is fighting for.

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