

Australian government extends use of Nauru as a refugee prison

Mike Head

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Without any prior public notification or scrutiny, the Australian Labor government has just extended a contract for the running of an asylum seeker prison on the tiny Pacific island of Nauru until at least 2027.

The notorious detention camp, which the Albanese government reopened in 2023, is currently incarcerating—many effectively indefinitely—105 male asylum seekers who had tried to reach Australia by boat.

Every aspect of the latest extension of the prison contract underscores Labor’s brutal treatment of asylum seekers, its flouting of international refugee law and its use of Nauru, the third smallest state in the world, as a neo-colonial dumping ground.

MTC Australia, a subsidiary of one of America’s largest private prison operators, the Management and Training Corporation, has provided “garrison, transferee arrivals and reception services” on the island since 2022, when it was initially contracted for two months for \$47 million.

The latest contract extension to 2027 takes MTC’s total remuneration to at least \$787 million, a figure that will rise, under the terms of the deal, if more refugees are forcibly transported to Nauru.

The number of asylum seekers imprisoned on Nauru has grown since July 2024, when an Asylum Seeker Resource Centre report said there were 96 people detained there, up from 15 in February 2024. Many were suffering physical and mental ill-health, aggravated by sub-standard accommodation and Nauru’s inadequate medical facilities.

These figures give just some indication of the ongoing toll of “Operation Sovereign Borders”—the forced and dangerous refugee boat seizures and/or “turnbacks” by naval or Australian Border Force vessels, conducted behind a wall of military secrecy.

Since first taking office in 2022, the Labor government has maintained this militarised regime, which was first

imposed by the previous Liberal-National Coalition government in 2014, as part of the inhuman “Pacific Solution” of detention on remote islands.

Every month, Operation Sovereign Borders releases reports boasting of how many asylum seekers it has repelled, detained or removed to other countries, without providing any details. This July, for instance, 48 “unauthorised maritime arrivals” were either “transferred” to a “regional processing country” in Southeast Asia or “returned” to the country they had fled.

The record shows that in its second term of office, since this May’s election, the Albanese government is further intensifying its anti-refugee and anti-immigrant regime.

The Nauru prison camp contract extension is on top of Labor’s pact, unveiled last month, to pay Nauru’s government more than \$408 million upfront to become a dumping ground—initially for more than 350 former immigration detainees—plus almost \$70 million per year to supposedly cover the costs of their as yet unknown accommodation and living arrangements.

Nauru, with a population of around 12,000 people, was impoverished by decades of phosphate mining under British, Australian and New Zealand colonial rule before nominal independence was granted in 1968. The mining has left about 80 percent of the small island uninhabitable and rising sea levels caused by global climate change are forecast to force 90 percent of its residents to relocate.

Labor’s moves are in line with the draconian measures being taken by governments globally, now spearheaded by the mass detentions and deportations of workers by the fascistic Trump administration in the US. Governments are demonising the record numbers of people worldwide fleeing war, persecution and impoverishment—making them scapegoats for the worsening domestic social conditions being created by the capitalist profit system.

Earlier this month, in a little-reported gathering in London, Home Affairs Minister Tony Burke joined his

counterparts from the US, UK, Canada and New Zealand in issuing a “Common Principles of Return” statement that pledged their “collective leadership and unity” in this offensive.

The “Five Eyes” ministerial statement declared that “a fundamental principle of the global migration system” is that states “have a sovereign right to determine which foreign nationals may enter and which may remain within their respective borders” and “the right to effect removal through enforced means.”

That is a flagrant violation of the post-World War II 1951 international Refugee Convention, which enshrined the right to flee persecution and an obligation on nation states not to repel or remove asylum seekers to face possible death or harm—the principle known as “non-refoulement.”

A direct parallel exists between Labor’s measures and those of the Trump administration, whose Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) force is rounding up thousands of working-class people and throwing them into detention prisons for deportation to grim locations without any due process.

The Albanese government suddenly tabled a bill this month to strip the basic right of procedural fairness—the right to a hearing—from people being consigned to Nauru or any other designated “third country.”

The first targets of the deportation scheme are 350 ex-immigration detainees that the government was forced to release from indefinite detention in November 2023 after the High Court, in a case known as NZYQ, ruled such detention unconstitutional.

However, lawyers have warned that Labor’s bill, combined with its other anti-immigrant legislation, could extend to removing more than 80,000 people currently living in Australia on temporary and insecure bridging visas.

None of this was mentioned by the Labor government during the campaign for the May 3 federal election. In fact, Labor won the election, despite obtaining only about a third of the primary votes, primarily by depicting the Liberal-National Coalition opposition as Trump-like, exploiting the widespread popular hostility to such anti-immigrant and fascistic measures.

Moreover, Labor’s “collective leadership” partnership with the Trump administration, and with the other partners in the “Five Eyes” worldwide surveillance network, underlines its essential alignment with the poisonous anti-immigrant agenda being prosecuted by far-right and neo-Nazi parties internationally.

In the wake of recent right-wing anti-immigration marches in Australia, the Labor government is itself stoking xenophobia and virulent nationalism by falsely blaming refugees, international students and immigrants for the worsening cost-of-living and housing affordability crises.

That reflects the DNA of the Labor Party and its affiliated trade union bureaucracies. This party was founded in the 1890s on the racist White Australia policy of excluding non-European migrants. In recent decades, it has helped spearhead international attacks on refugees, including the Keating government’s introduction of mandatory detention in 1992, and the Rudd-Gillard government’s reopening of offshore detention camps in 2012.

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

On every continent, the ruling class and its political and trade union 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, 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. Against this barbaric agenda, workers and young people must defend the basic democratic right of people to live and work wherever they choose, with full social and citizenship rights.

The fight against the anti-refugee and anti-immigrant witch hunting requires a unified mass movement of the working class globally, across capitalism’s reactionary national borders, 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.



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