

# Australian government prepares vicious immigration crackdown

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The Albanese Labor government is preparing to unveil a wholesale attack on the basic rights of immigrants and asylum seekers.

According to briefings given to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) last week, the plans include further cutting and delaying access to family reunion visas, slashing temporary worker visas, and revoking work and appeal rights for asylum seekers who have their initial protection visa applications rejected by government officials.

These measures will affect hundreds of thousands of temporary visa holders, forcing many into super-exploited black-market work or reliance on charities to survive, or face deportation, and separate many immigrant families indefinitely.

The full extent of the assault is still to be announced, but the thrust is clear. As many as half a million migrant workers and refugees, currently on insecure bridging visas are threatened by the abolition of their right to work legally, and their right to appeal to tribunals and courts against visa denials. Forced departures or mass deportations will follow.

This offensive marks a sharp turn by the Labor government to make immigrants and refugees scapegoats for the worsening cost-of-living crisis and deteriorating social conditions confronting working-class households, intensified by the global inflationary impact of the criminal US-Israeli war on Iran.

Home Affairs Minister Tony Burke was due to deliver a major speech at the National Press Club last Thursday to outline the measures, but this was cancelled at the last minute. Sources reportedly told the *Australian Financial Review* that a lengthy cabinet meeting signed off on the package last week, but the government's "leadership group" postponed it on the basis that it did not go far enough to cut the immigration numbers.

That leadership group was headed by the acting prime minister, Richard Marles, in the absence of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, who was on a week's leave. It is not clear to what extent Albanese was involved, but he was reported to have also expressed concerns that the plan was too weak.

From what has been leaked to the media, it seems that one of the objections was that the package did not sufficiently end appeal rights—derided as “loopholes”—that permit those denied or stripped of visas to seek review by tribunals and courts,

which can take years to determine, and remain in the country on bridging visas in the meantime.

Those most vulnerable include the 432,000 people who were on bridging visas as of March this year, and the 93,000 asylum seekers refused visas and still living in the community as of February.

Since taking office in 2022, the Albanese government has boasted of cutting the annual permanent migration intake to 185,000, outdoing the previous Liberal-National Coalition government's last target of 195,000.

But Labor is intent on going further by achieving what Marles described as a “guiding star” of reducing net overseas migration (NOM)—which counts temporary entries and exits—from the current 301,000 to 225,000 by 2027–28. That figure had reached a peak of 558,000 in late 2023 after the country's borders were reopened following the initial phases of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Under Labor's regime, about 90 percent of claims for asylum made by people who are already in Australia on temporary visas are rejected, according to department figures, but applicants have the right to appeal through the Administrative Review Tribunal and the Federal Court, a process that can take up to eight years, primarily due to staffing shortages.

These protection visa decisions can have life-or-death consequences, including the return of a person to face persecution, violence or death.

Burke's proposed package was also expected to prevent the spouses, children and parents of Australian citizens and permanent residents from applying for family visas while they are in the country as tourists. This would force them to leave the country and join an already lengthy waiting list, effectively separating families for many years.

Wait times for visas to bring parents to Australia are so long that more than 1,500 applicants died before receiving their visa over a 21-month period to March 31, recent Department of Home Affairs data shows.

For applicants for parent visas, which provide permanent residency for an application fee of just under \$9,000, the wait times are now an estimated 33 years. For wealthier families, “contributory” parent visas have waiting times of about 15 years but cost almost \$50,000 each.

At the end of the 2024–25 financial year, there were more than 157,000 applicants in the parent visa backlog, the department’s latest annual report shows. This financial year, the government has already cut the annual allocation for parent visas from 8,500 to 7,060, effectively extending the waiting times.

Labor’s measures would be on top of recent moves to further reduce net migration. They included punitive across-the-board increases in visa application fees, which took effect on July 1.

Budget papers published in May showed the budget would collect an extra \$1.2 billion in visa fees this financial year alone, up by 24 percent, compared to what had been forecast in the December mid-year budget update.

Burke also issued two ministerial directives, ordering officials to prioritise onshore applicants over offshore applicants for permanent skilled and family visas—essentially blocking most international arrivals under those schemes. The changes, which commenced on July 25, put onshore applicants working in law enforcement and the defence industry at the top of the priority list, seeking to funnel more workers into the police and military-related workforces.

All these measures are an attack on the working class as a whole. Stripping work rights away from workers or students will push them into the black economy of especially unsafe, precarious and exploitative employment, undercutting the conditions of all workers.

Some business peak bodies have voiced concerns that aspects of the government’s plans could affect their capacity to recruit selected workers from overseas. The corporate elite’s only interest is in accessing cheap labour, one way or the other.

With its opinion poll ratings falling to historic lows of less than 30 percent, the Albanese government is seeking to outdo Senator Pauline Hanson’s far-right One Nation party in demonising and punishing migrant workers, international students and asylum seekers. This is a diversion from the underlying roots of the declining living standards, which lie in the capitalist profit system itself, enforced by the Labor government, and the spiral into a new world war.

Several refugee rights groups issued a joint statement last week, drawing attention to the fact that removing work rights would “deliberately force people into poverty and dependence on charities.”

They condemned “Labor’s failure to confront One Nation’s fearmongering” as a “disgraceful failure of leadership” and calling on the government to “directly challenge the billionaire-funded misinformation campaign fuelling anti-migrant fear and division.”

Far from being a “lesser evil” to One Nation, Labor governments themselves have a long record of poisonous nationalist and anti-immigrant policies to divide the working class, always with the backing of their trade union partners.

This record stretches from Labor’s founding White Australia policy in the 1890s to the Keating government’s pioneering of

mandatory detention of refugees in 1992 and the Albanese government’s incarceration of asylum seekers and ex-immigration detainees on the remote Pacific island of Nauru (recently renamed Naoero).

Albanese is a case in point. He once postured cynically as a defender of refugee rights to head off widespread disgust with offshore detention, but now heads a Labor government that is enforcing one of the world’s most barbaric imprisonment regimes in Nauru. In fact, his government’s maintenance and extension of Operation Sovereign Borders to militarily repel or capture refugee boats is a model for far-right parties worldwide, such as Nigel Farage’s Reform UK.

From Europe to the United States, the anti-immigrant witch hunting, spearheaded by the Trump administration’s ICE raids, killings and deportations, serves a reactionary purpose. It seeks to divert mounting working-class anger over falling living standards, housing unaffordability, cuts to social programs and the channelling of billions into military spending, away from the capitalist system and toward the most vulnerable members of society.

It aims to divide the working class—which in Australia is truly international, with nearly half the population having a parent born overseas and figures reaching two-thirds in major working-class areas—along national and ethnic lines under conditions of preparations for war.

The record demonstrates that no appeals to the Labor government or any other party of the capitalist political establishment will reverse this course.

The only answer to the toxic offensive lies in the fight for a global movement of the working class to take control and reorganise society on a socialist basis, for human and social need, not corporate profit. As part of that struggle, workers and young people must defend the vulnerable and the basic democratic right of working people to live and work anywhere, with full social and citizenship rights.



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