

Australian capitalist parties escalate anti-immigrant bidding war

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Liberal-National Coalition leader Angus Taylor this week announced a new migration policy package, promoting it as the “the biggest cut to immigration in the history” of Australia.

This marks a new stage in the bidding war between the Coalition, the Albanese Labor government and Senator Pauline Hanson’s far-right One Nation to outdo each other in blaming immigrant workers, international students and refugees for the cost-of-living and housing affordability crisis that is devastating working-class households.

Taylor’s announcement demonstrates the fundamental unity between the three capitalist parties in trying to divert growing working-class discontent—expressed in strikes by teachers, health care workers and university staff—into anti-foreigner and nationalist directions.

The Labor government is already spearheading the assault. Last month, Home Affairs Minister Tony Burke unveiled plans to have 700,000 fewer people in the country in 2030–31 than had been forecast before the COVID-19 pandemic. That virtually matched One Nation’s pledge to remove 750,000 people over the next three years.

As a result, thousands of immigrant workers and their families, branded as visa overstayers, face raids on their homes and workplaces, imprisonment and deportation. That is despite widespread disgust at such operations, as seen in the mass opposition to the seizure of a Sri Lankan family in the rural town of Biloela in 2018, and in the reaction to the Trump administration’s deadly Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids, incarcerations and deportations.

Taylor said a Coalition government would more than halve net overseas migration (NOM) to 100,000 per year for two years, rising to 130,000 in year three and 160,000 in year four. The plan entails a reduction of roughly 650,000 temporary visa holders over four years. The victims would be workers and students, as well as refugees, whose intake numbers would be halved to 10,000 a year.

Taylor said this would mean forcibly removing an estimated 77,000 people who are allegedly living in Australia without valid visas, which includes many appealing against visa denials—matching a vow by Burke. Taylor spoke of more extensive social media screening, “Australian values” and English language visa conditions, and a joint-agency removal

taskforce.

In reality, the threat of mass surveillance, roundups, detentions and deportations in working-class areas would go much further. According to the latest official statistics, nearly three million people are on insecure temporary visas. They make up about 20 percent of the working class, often employed in poor conditions in industries such as agriculture, health care, aged care, hospitality, fast food and deliveries.

As well as 732,210 New Zealand citizens and 357,110 visitors, this includes 609,678 international students, 432,300 people on short-term bridging visas, 258,974 young working holiday makers, 255,821 skilled employment visa holders and 237,015 temporary graduate visa holders. Those on bridging visas include 93,000 asylum seekers refused visas, mostly pursuing legal appeals.

Tracking down and removing tens of thousands of people would require a further boosting of the joint operations of the domestic political spy agency, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the Australian Federal Police (AFP) and the para-military Australian Border Force (ABF).

Asked on television whether the operation could resemble ICE, Taylor denied that. Yet he said these agencies “are good at what they do, but they have to be given the resources and the capacity to do it.”

Like Labor’s plans, the Coalition’s policy features meeting the cheap labour demands of employers and the establishment of a war-related economy. The Coalition would revise the temporary skilled priority list, establish a “strike force” to fast-track construction applications, introduce a new agriculture visa and create 7,000 new visa places for the AUKUS military pact and the US-led Five Eyes global surveillance network.

Taylor, the Liberal leader, declared: “We will regain control of our borders... we will ensure that immigration policy is in the interests of our great country and no one else.” The Nationals leader, Matt Canavan, called it “an Australia first migration plan,” echoing Trump’s agenda.

This rhetoric goes beyond an immediate bid to stem the collapse of the Coalition’s vote, which like Labor’s has fallen under 30 percent in media opinion polls, generally lower than One Nation’s polling and recent state election results. A central focus of all the anti-immigrant measures is the whipping up of

Australian nationalism as an essential ingredient of preparing the population for war.

In a similar vein, the Coalition would also restrict access to welfare payments and the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) strictly to Australian citizens, thus threatening to inflict dire poverty on thousands of working-class residents.

The only differences between the Labor government, One Nation and the Coalition are purely tactical, over which visa categories to cut the most while protecting corporate access to low-cost labour and building a war economy.

For example, the Coalition would have exemptions for aged care and health workers, as well as young backpackers, employed in rural and regional areas, ensuring profits for hospitality and agricultural businesses.

One Nation wants to transform the NOM figure to negative for three years, then cap it at 130,000 a year. Labor is already cutting it from over 400,000 after reopening the borders during the COVID pandemic to 225,000 by 2027–28.

The Labor government's only criticism of the Coalition plan is that it did not go far enough to protect employers' access to low-cost labour. Burke said the Coalition's policy would negatively impact the economy. "It's bad for businesses, prices go up for consumers—it's a bad deal all around."

That was in line with the reaction of major business groups—including the Property Council of Australia, the Business Council of Australia, and the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry. They criticised aspects of the Coalition's reductions, warning they risk severe worker shortages and economic harm, particularly in sectors like health and aged care.

Like Labor, the Coalition is targeting international students. Their annual commencements—which Labor has so far cut by around 10 percent to 337,000—would be reduced to 240,000. Temporary graduate visas would be abolished and most students' family members blocked from coming to Australia, matching Labor's measures.

Such moves are already adding to Labor's financial pressure on the universities, which is designed to push them further into restructuring, along the lines of Labor's 2024 Universities Accord, to satisfy the training and research requirements of employers and the war machine. Universities and education industry groups said the student cuts could threaten as many as 250,000 jobs in education.

After Taylor's announcement, Hanson crowed that the Coalition and Labor had been "dragged kicking and screaming" to her immigration policy position. Yet Taylor's claim of proposing the biggest cut in history recalls the racist history of Australian capitalism and the Labor Party itself, which was based for most of the 20th century on the White Australia policy.

Moreover, it was the Keating Labor government that began the renewed assault on refugees and officially unwanted immigrants in 1992 by introducing mandatory imprisonment of

asylum seekers. This regime is continued today by the Albanese government, which is incarcerating former immigration detainees, previously released by a High Court ruling, on the remote Pacific island of Naoero, an ex-Australian colony, formerly known as Nauru.

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

Migrant workers in the agricultural sector have described working 10- to 12-hour days for poverty wages, overcrowded and dilapidated accommodation and near-total control by labour-hire contractors over every aspect of their lives.

These plans will also create police-state conditions of raids in working-class areas as opposition grows to the underlying agenda of war and austerity, which is diverting billions of dollars into military spending at the cost of essential social programs, such as the NDIS, public schools and hospitals.

All the capitalist parties are trying to scapegoat immigrants for the deteriorating social conditions, intensified by the renewed global inflationary impact of the criminal US-Israeli war on Iran, which the Albanese government has backed from day one.

From the US to Europe, governments of all political stripes are pursuing anti-immigrant witch hunting to channel mounting working-class anger over soaring social inequality, cuts to social programs and the funnelling of billions into the military, toward the most vulnerable members of society.

This aims to divide the working class along national and ethnic lines under conditions of an unfolding world war, which includes Labor's growing integration of Australia into US plans for war against China.



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