

Australian Labor Party exploits pandemic to scapegoat foreign workers

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The Labor Party's shadow immigration minister, Senator Kristina Keneally, called for a "restart" of Australia's "migration program" in a recent opinion piece in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and Melbourne *Age*.

"The post-COVID-19 question we must ask now is this: when we restart our migration program, do we want migrants to return to Australia in the same numbers and in the same composition as before the crisis?" Keneally asked. "Our answer should be no."

Keneally's call for immigration cuts was approvingly retweeted by Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) secretary Sally McManus, making clear the trade unions' support for Labor's divisive demagoguery.

This lines up the Labor Party and the ACTU directly behind the drive by governments around the globe, personified by US President Trump, to promote toxic nationalism and blame refugees and immigrant workers for the mass unemployment and poverty that governments and big business are imposing in response to the pandemic.

It also feeds into the promotion of far-right and fascist groups that demonise "foreigners." Senator Pauline Hanson, the founder-leader of the anti-immigrant One Nation party, claimed vindication. She tweeted that she had called for years for reduced immigration and had been labelled a racist for her "strong stance on jobs for Australians first."

Keneally criticised the Liberal-National Coalition government from a right-wing nationalist standpoint, saying: "Letting lots of migrants come to Australia is an easier way to drive economic growth than increasing productivity or investing in skills and training."

This same government has already demonstrated its own bid to scapegoat and punish foreign workers by excluding all 1.2 million temporary visa holders,

together with international students, from its JobKeeper wage subsidy scheme, leaving them financially destitute.

Keneally embraced the federal government's reduction of permanent immigration from 190,000 to 160,000 in 2018, under the pretext of stopping congestion in major cities, and scolded it for not likewise cutting the number of temporary visas.

Keneally claimed that temporary visas encouraged employers to bring in low-skilled and underpaid workers, and this was to blame for declining wages. "We must make sure that Australians get a fair go and a first go at jobs," she declared.

This serves only to split the working class along nationalist lines, and divert attention from the true cause of the global corporate offensive against workers' wages and conditions—the rapacious drive by the financial elite for private profit and the accumulation of vast wealth.

Exploiting the COVID-19 crisis, Keneally wrote that the government "will soon have an opportunity to do something we have never done before: restart a migration program." She praised Conservative Party UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson for slashing immigration.

"Last year Boris Johnson restricted low-skilled, temporary migration," Keneally wrote, and "coming out of the COVID-19 crisis, Australia can seize the opportunity to do something similar for our citizens."

In truth, Johnson's attack on migrant workers borrows from the Australian playbook. His Tory government is introducing a draconian points-based system, which discriminates heavily in favour of wealthy applicants, a system that was formalised in Australia by the Hawke Labor government in 1989.

Reportedly, there were some initial concerns among

some Labor MPs that Keneally's article was too blatant in its "Australia-first" rhetoric, particularly after Hanson's endorsement. But Senator Penny Wong, Labor's shadow foreign minister, defended her colleague on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Q&A" program.

Wong said: "I think the proposition Kristina Keneally was putting was that we need to rethink the balance between permanent and temporary migration and I think that's a sound point to be making."

The Labor Party has a long history of vilifying overseas workers, using xenophobic rhetoric to divide workers along racist and nationalist lines. The Labor Party's founding program formulated the White Australia Policy, which promoted the reactionary illusion of creating a "workingman's paradise" by banning "coloured" labour.

The Labor Party has revived its anti-immigrant policy during every period of capitalist economic breakdown. Amid the destruction of workers' jobs and conditions following the global financial crisis of 2008-09, the Gillard Labor government proposed cutting immigration and resumed indefinitely detaining refugees on remote Pacific islands, Nauru and Manus.

In run-up to the 2013 election, Labor's Prime Minister Kevin Rudd declared: "As of today, asylum seekers who come here by boat without a visa will never be settled in Australia."

Since another historic electoral defeat last year, the Labor Party has gone even further down this road, as part of the explicitly pro-big business program of new leader Anthony Albanese. As soon as he appointed Keneally as Labor's immigration spokeswoman, she began denouncing the Coalition government for supposedly allowing too many refugees to arrive by plane. Last August, Keneally accused the government of "losing control" of the country's borders because 80,000 people arriving at airports had sought asylum from persecution.

New Zealand's Labour Party, which has a similar dirty history, is pursuing the same path. Labour Party-led coalition government has slashed immigration, including by imposing wealth-based restrictions.

Keneally's latest comments come in a definite context. On behalf of big business, the federal, state and territory governments, Coalition and Labor alike, are pushing workers back into workplaces, despite

knowing this will trigger further dangerous COVID-19 outbreaks. Mass unemployment and under-employment also is being used as a weapon to compel workers to accept cuts to wages and conditions, which the unions have agreed to enforce against millions of workers, pledging to give employers "everything they want."

The Socialist Equality Party opposes all forms of racism and nationalism, which pit worker against worker, fuel war tensions and blame the most vulnerable layers of the working class—particularly immigrants and refugees—for the social crisis created by capitalism. As part of the fight for the unity of the global working class, we unconditionally defend the basic democratic right of refugees and immigrants to live, study and work in Australia, or anywhere in the world, with full citizenship rights.



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