

Australian Labor government blocking Palestinians from refugee status

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A Senate committee hearing Wednesday revealed the extent to which the Labor government is blocking Palestinians from Gaza from entering Australia, while denying the few who do arrive from receiving the protections they are entitled as refugees.

This expresses Labor's commitment to a brutal, bipartisan "border" regime. It also underscores the government's ongoing support for the Israeli genocide and its own contribution to the brutalisation of Gazans, notwithstanding phony professions of "humanitarian" concern.

The information was not volunteered, but came out in the course of questioning of Home Affairs immigration officials Damian Kilner and Andrew Kiley, as well as Labor's assistant foreign minister Tim Watts by independent Senator David Pocock and Greens MP David Shoebridge.

Home Affairs, it emerged, has denied the applications of 4,614 Palestinians for temporary visitor visas since October 7, almost twice as many as the 2,686 that have been approved. With getting out of Gaza extremely onerous, dangerous and expensive, just 1,044 of those with approvals have actually arrived in Australia.

The eligibility of Palestinians in Gaza with relatives in Australia for the temporary visitor scheme was announced last year by the Labor government. While fully backing Israel's bombardment of the strip, which has now claimed at least 35,000 lives and constitutes an ethnic-cleansing operation, Labor has shed crocodile tears over the plight of civilians.

The visa scheme was part of a cynical public relations effort. Absurdly, it was extended on an equal basis to Palestinians in the Occupied Territories and to Israelis, though there is not a remote resemblance between conditions in besieged Gaza on the one hand, and Israeli cities such as Jerusalem and Tel Aviv on the other.

The subclass 600 visitor visa is manifestly inadequate

for those fleeing Gaza. It is limited to a maximum of 12 months. Those who receive it are barred from working, from receiving government welfare and other basic rights such as public healthcare. They are, in other words, in a state of complete uncertainty and dependent entirely on family and non-government charity.

In March, awful stories were reported in the press of Gazans, who had been granted the 600 visa, receiving sudden notices of cancellation from Home Affairs. In some cases, the Palestinians affected were already in transit and faced the prospect of being completely stranded, unable to return to Gaza and blocked from forward travel to Australia.

A typical cancellation notice stated: "The delegate considered you never intended a genuine stay temporarily in Australia and therefore the visa was granted based on circumstances that never existed."

This was absurd. It was obvious to everyone that Palestinians fleeing Gaza abroad would not be able to return, even if they wished to. The borders are closed. Much of the strip has now been leveled by the Israeli regime, with the majority of the population herded to the southernmost city of Rafah, which is now being bombarded and invaded too.

When the cancellations were reported, government ministers stated they were a matter for Home Affairs. Officials from that department vaguely indicated that the cancellations may have been the result of automated processes, and some of them were overturned.

The latest figures, however, revealing that thousands of Palestinians are being blocked from entering Australia make clear this is Labor's deliberate policy. When questioned about the denials, immigration official Kilner could only state that those rejected had been deemed "not to meet the requirements."

When Senator Pocock asked how many Palestinians had been granted humanitarian stay subclass 449 visas, which

permit the recipient up to three years residency, Kiley bluntly responded: “The answer is zero. That visa has not been made available to Palestinians. The visitor visa is the visa available to individuals.”

Both Pocock and Shoebridge noted that the 449 visas, providing temporary refugee protection, had been extended to Ukrainians after the Russian invasion and to Afghans after the takeover of that country by the Taliban. In the case of Ukrainian refugees, they were permitted to enter the country on visitor visas, and then to apply for 449s. They were granted beginning in April, 2022, less than two months after the invasion.

Pocock and Shoebridge pointed to the double standards and demanded an explanation. Watts was unable to oblige. Adopting a belligerent tone, he declared: “It might be hard to believe, but not everything we do is political. Not everything we do is about political judgement; I know that’s hard for some parties to understand. We’re trying to take a principled position here.” What all of that means is entirely unclear.

The politics are obvious. The Labor government has enthusiastically supported the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, which was stoked and instigated by Washington with the aim of inflicting a defeat on Moscow. The granting of the 449s to Ukrainians is bound up with this pro-war position, while the denial of the same visa is connected to Labor’s backing for the Israeli annihilation of the Palestinian population.

That is hardly to suggest that Labor has any concern for the fate of ordinary Ukrainians. Those on the 449s, time limited to three years, also face considerable uncertainty as to whether they will receive a bridging visa.

More generally, Labor’s backing for the war, including contributing to Australia’s provision of more than a billion dollars in aid to the fascistic Kiev regime, most of it in weaponry, has helped to prolong and escalate a conflict that has claimed hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian lives.

In another demonstration of Labor’s ongoing alignment with the Zionist regime, the government joined hands with the Liberal-National Coalition last week to vote down a Greens motion recognising Palestinian statehood. It was again left to Watts to explain, this time asserting that the motion was procedural, and they were always voted down in the House of Representatives.

Such recognition would do nothing. The perspective of a two-state solution is in tatters, with Israel seeking to complete the displacement of Palestinians from historic Palestine. Even if a two-state “solution” were established,

it would mean nothing more than a Palestinian Bantustan, governed by a corrupt ruling elite subservient to an inherently expansionist Zionist regime.

The vote was nevertheless of note in again pointing to the cynical character of Labor’s maneuvering and its attempts to deflect from its support for the genocide. Labor has denounced slogans for Palestinian liberation, such as “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free,” absurdly arguing that they imperil a two-state solution. But Labor is hostile to even that bankrupt and unviable “non-solution,” in keeping with its support for the far-right Israeli government.

On Friday, activists organised a day of action, which included protests outside the offices of Labor MPs, denouncing their role in the genocide. Some placed mock Palestinian corpses outside the offices and daubed their windows in paint, symbolising blood. This provoked a furious reaction from the Labor government. Its Foreign Minister Penny Wong, herself complicit in a genocide, accused the Greens of being complicit...in protests against it.

The various developments last week again exposed the bankruptcy of the line peddled by the Greens, independents such as Pocock and an array of pseudo-left groups. All have asserted that Labor can be pressured, through moral appeals, to reverse its support for Israel and to adopt a “humanitarian” position in defence of the Palestinians.

That is not going to happen. The purpose of such arguments is to trap opposition behind the sclerotic parliamentary order and the Labor government itself.

In reality, Australia’s support for the genocide is inseparable from its involvement in the proxy war against Russia, and above all its frontline position in the US-led plans for a catastrophic war against China. That underscores the fact that a fight against the genocide requires the independent mobilisation of the working class against imperialist war, the government and the capitalist system that is hurtling towards disaster.



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