

# Australian Labor government ramps up anti-immigrant measures

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Seemingly in response to a relentless witch-hunt in the Murdoch media and other corporate outlets, the Albanese Labor government is rushing to re-cancel visas and deport non-citizens with previous criminal convictions, regardless of their life-long and family ties to Australia.

This is occurring amid a wider offensive throughout the political and media establishment, as in the US and Europe, to falsely accuse immigrant arrivals, including refugees and overseas students, of being responsible for the intensifying housing, cost-of-living and social crisis.

By the weekend, Immigration Minister Andrew Giles boasted that he had, within just a few days, abruptly re-cancelled 20 visas, exercising extraordinary powers under the Migration Act to overturn rulings by the Administrative Appeals Tribunal.

Under a ministerial direction previously issued by Giles, known as Direction 99, the tribunal had upheld appeals against government visa cancellations. As per Direction 99, tribunal members had taken into account whether a non-citizen should be allowed to remain in the country after serving a prison term because they had “lived in the Australian community for most of their life, or from a very young age.”

Such is the government’s intent that Giles told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s AM radio program he was working “night and day” to review and reverse tribunal decisions. That would pave the way for immediate detentions in immigration prisons, followed by deportations if other countries would accept those affected.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese personally declared last week that his government would revoke and rewrite Direction 99 to specify that “community safety” must be the top priority, over and above community ties and any other consideration, in deciding whether to allow someone to remain in Australia.

Giles said this had always been the government’s highest priority. He and other government ministers accused tribunal members of misinterpreting Direction 99, which the government modified in January 2023 by listing life-long

ties to Australia as one factor to be considered before cancelling a visa.

That modification came after years of protests by governments in New Zealand and other countries against the decades-old bipartisan Australian policy of deporting people with criminal convictions even if they had lived in Australia for most of their lives.

In some cases, people were deported to countries where they did not even speak the language, let alone have any means of support. In other cases, people were separated from their families and children in Australia.

New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon spoke with Albanese last week to express displeasure with the Australian government’s vow to rewrite Direction 99, which will make it easier for people to be deported to New Zealand.

But the Albanese government is pushing ahead regardless.

Under the 2023 modification to Direction 99, other primary visa-cancellation factors were retained, leaving vast deportation powers in the government’s hands. These factors include “the protection of the Australian community from criminal or other serious conduct” and “the expectations of the community.”

The government did not change Section 501 of the Migration Act, which automatically cancels a visa if someone has been sentenced to 12 months or more in prison or has been guilty of sex offences involving a child.

That draconian section, known as the “character test,” also gives the minister sweeping powers to deny or revoke visas because of a person’s “past and present criminal conduct” or on even more vague and political grounds. These include failing a security assessment by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) or a risk that a person would “incite discord in the Australian community or in a segment of that community.”

By vowing to rewrite Direction 99, the Labor government is not just seeking to satisfy scare-mongering demands by the media corporations and the Liberal-National Coalition for a crackdown. It is pursuing its own poisonous policies

that divide workers along nationalist lines.

The Albanese government is already outdoing the previous Coalition government in deporting people after they have served prison time for criminal convictions. In the year to June 2019, when Opposition Leader Peter Dutton was home affairs minister, his department revoked 235 automatic visa cancellations, or 41 percent, to show leniency to convicted criminals with close ties to Australia.

By comparison, in the year to June 2023, under Home Affairs Minister Clare O’Neil and with Giles as immigration minister, the department revoked 144 automatic cancellations, or only 28 percent, for the same reasons.

The Labor government also has joined a vicious witch-hunt against 151 ex-immigration detainees, a few of whom have been charged with serious criminal offences after being released by a High Court ruling last November that partially ended the decades-long regime of indefinite immigration detention.

Labor joined hands with the Coalition late last year to rush through parliament police-state legislation that gives the immigration minister arbitrary powers to impose curfews and 24-hour ankle bracelet monitoring on ex-detainees.

Another bill was also jointly pushed through to authorise the continued imprisonment of non-citizens after they have served prison terms via “preventative detention” orders.

Both these measures tear up basic legal and democratic rights. They amount to “thought crime” laws, inflicting further punishment on non-citizens, potentially indefinitely, for what they might do in the future.

Last month, the Albanese government attempted to ram through a far-reaching immigration deportation bill, which includes the power to repeatedly imprison people for up to five years for refusing to sign documents facilitating their deportation and that of their children.

That would clear the way for the government to detain and forcibly deport at least 5,000 people currently living in the community on bridging visas.

The bill would also give the government the power to impose blanket travel bans, barring entry visas to people from designated “removal concern countries” such as Iran, China, Russia and South Sudan.

This bill has caused widespread concern and opposition throughout working-class immigrant communities. For now, the government apparently has delayed the bill until later this month.

The Labor government is matching governments globally, and far-right and fascistic elements, including Donald Trump, the French National Rally, the Meloni administration in Italy and the AfD (Alternative for Germany), in witch-hunting and seeking to deport “non-citizens.”

This is a drive to divide working people, domestically and

globally. “Foreigners” are being blamed for the deteriorating social conditions being produced by capitalism’s economic and cost-of-living crisis and the channelling of billions of dollars into military spending amid the US-backed Gaza genocide and the plunge into wider war against Russia and China.

In Australia, both the Albanese government and the Coalition are trying to divert the rising political and social unrest by blaming immigrants and international students for the growing lack of affordable housing.

The government has vowed to halve net overseas migration to 260,000 by next year, primarily by cutting overseas student numbers. The Coalition has promised even bigger cuts.

In reality, according to a study by Professor Alan Gamlen, director of the Australian National University’s Migration Hub, Australia today has 352,000 fewer people than expected because of the migration plunge in the first years of the COVID-19 pandemic, when governments closed borders and told overseas students to leave.

The truth is that the housing crisis has been created by successive governments, both Labor and Coalition, and the corporate property developers, which have profited from their incentives, deregulation and the decimation of public housing.

The Labor government’s latest budget, handed down last month, deepens the corporate agenda. It grants more than \$200 billion in reduced income tax revenue over the next decade, with the lion’s share going to the wealthiest households. That will mean greater cuts to public health, education and other social spending, on top of the more than \$368 billion to be spent on the AUKUS alliance and other military measures, including for the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and for a US-led war against China.

Workers and young people must oppose Labor’s assault on non-citizens and basic democratic rights. Reactionary precedents are being set that can be used more broadly, not just against immigrants and overseas students, as opposition grows worldwide to the worsening social crisis and war drive.



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