

# Detention centre staff defy Australian government's refugee censorship laws

By Will Morrow  
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In an act of political defiance, and considerable personal courage, 41 medical professionals, teachers and other former staff inside Australia's refugee detention camps yesterday issued an open letter challenging the reactionary "Border Force Act." The law, which took effect yesterday, contains extraordinary provisions for imposing jail sentences on anyone who publicly speaks out on the conditions inside the detention centres.

The professionals state in their letter that the law "strengthens the wall of secrecy which prevents public scrutiny. We have advocated, and will continue to advocate, for the health of those for whom we have a duty of care, despite the threats of imprisonment, because standing by and watching sub-standard and harmful care, child abuse and gross violations of human rights is not ethically justifiable."

Their letter concludes: "We are aware that in publishing this letter we may be prosecuted under the Border Force Act and we challenge the department to prosecute so that these issues may be discussed in open court and in the full view of the Australian public."

The Border Force Act underscores both the lawless character of the "border protection" and detention centre regime of both the conservative Abbott government and Labor opposition, and their awareness of the revulsion within the Australian population of their treatment of asylum seekers. The bill was passed through parliament on May 14 by both major parties.

Under the new law, it is a criminal act, punishable by up to two years in prison, for any person working in a detention centre to publicly reveal the conditions imposed on asylum seekers.

Those who signed the letter have stated that abiding by the law would make it impossible for them to maintain their medical responsibilities. Dr John-Paul Sanggaran, who previously worked for the immigration department's healthcare provider, told the ABC yesterday that, even

prior to the new law, "We already have a situation where there's a significant level of secrecy around immigration detention. Some of the barriers include the fact that you could lose your job."

"We're not going to stop talking about what we've seen," he said. "The things that we've seen are too terrible, human rights abuses, sexual abuse, child abuse, and we're not going to respond to these threats from the Government." The *Guardian* has published the explanations of ten of the signatories for their motivations in signing.

Under agreements made by the former Gillard/Rudd Labor governments, all asylum seekers who attempt to reach Australia by boat are intercepted at sea and dumped in detention camps on the impoverished, remote Pacific island nation of Nauru, Manus Island in Papua New Guinea, and Australia's Christmas Island. Australia's persecution of refugees takes place in flagrant violation of international law and the fundamental democratic right to seek and claim asylum.

Even those officially granted refugee status cannot reach Australia, but are instead offered the option of settling in Nauru, Papua New Guinea or Cambodia.

The camps in Nauru and Manus Island are located on sites that experience intense heat. The detainees are not provided air conditioning and are made to sleep in crowded accommodation with no privacy. In Nauru, they sleep in tents. The camps have been condemned by international human rights organisations and the United Nations.

In recent weeks, a series of revelations by staff have underscored why the political establishment is seeking to prevent the Australian working class knowing about the conditions in which refugees are forced to live.

Natasha Blucher and Michelle Groeneveld, who until October last year worked on behalf of the Save the Children charity in Nauru, spoke to the ABC on Monday.

Both were ordered off the island by the government on the basis of spurious allegations that they had “coached” asylum seekers to commit desperate acts of self-harm.

From the moment the asylum seekers arrive in the Australian-controlled camps, they are deliberately dehumanised and deprived of the most elementary freedoms and human rights. According to Blucher, the camp guards contracted by the camp’s security operator, Wilson Security—many of whom, according to the ABC, are former soldiers and police officers—refer to the refugees, not by name, but by an identification number provided to them upon their arrival. This is a practise employed both in maximum security prison systems, and in World War II-era Nazi concentration camps.

“Most of the time if you talk to a child and most of the time if you talk to an adult and you ask them who they are or what their name is, they will give you their boat identification number,” Blucher said. “[P]eople would constantly say, ‘They think we’re animals, they’re treating us like animals.’”

“The power balance is ... out of control,” she said. “[T]he officers can dictate when a person can eat, can shower at a certain time. There’s an officer there who turns the water on and turns the water off; you can only move through the camp in certain ways.”

Blucher described an interaction between a female asylum seeker and a Wilson security guard. The woman was “sobbing at the gate and saying, ‘Please, please, I just need to go and see my husband; they took him away last night, he’s very sick, I don’t know where he is.’”

“No! Go away! Shoo!” the officer replied.

Groeneveld explained, “It’s very obvious in that environment that the government do not want to give any comfort or make anything comfortable at all.”

A review ordered by the government last October into sexual abuse in Nauru also provided some indication of the conditions in the camp. The entire regime is designed to place asylum seekers in a helpless and vulnerable position. The review referred to evidence, including intelligence reports from Wilson Security, of sexual abuse of detainees. Refugees have claimed they were instructed to perform sexual acts in exchange for “privileges” at the camp, including longer shower time. The report also noted evidence of organised prostitution, including with payments to refugees in marijuana. There have been at least three claims of rape.

One asylum seeker described the proliferation of drug addiction among the detainees “because they are suffering great depression here, and they feel relieved

when they smoke the marijuana ...”

The entire political establishment has feigned shock and horror over the most egregious of these revelations. But these conditions are the deliberate result of a conscious policy which uses the barbaric treatment of refugees to send a deterrent to anyone else seeking to claim asylum in the country.

The demonization and persecution of asylum seekers has been the justification for a sharp shift to the right by the Australian political establishment, and the casting aside of international law and legal conventions. Every aspect of the government’s “border protection” regime, which has become a “model” for countries across Europe, is criminal.

It was revealed last month that the Abbott government had paid the crew of a refugee boat to turn around and return the asylum seekers to Indonesia—essentially an act of piracy. Following the bipartisan passing of the Border Force Act, the Labor opposition again joined the government to pass a law last week to block a legal challenge to the mandatory offshore detention program.

The working class and young people should take the sharpest warning from these policies and the increasingly authoritarian laws that are being introduced to enforce them. The measures now being used against refugees, the most vulnerable sections of the international working class, will ultimately be used to try and suppress mounting opposition to the political establishment’s policies of social austerity and militarism.

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