

# Refugees stage hunger strike against immigration crackdown in New Zealand

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**6 October 2000**

About 100 Chinese refugees are staging a hunger strike in central Auckland to protest a new immigration crackdown announced recently by New Zealand's Labour-Alliance Government. The strike was launched last week following a demonstration by several hundred Asian migrants against their exclusion from a partial "overstayer amnesty" announced by Immigration Minister Lianne Dalziel. The one-off amnesty, which accompanies the immigration crackdown, is being offered to a limited number of long-term "overstayers" who meet certain carefully targeted criteria.

The hunger strikers—men, women and children—say they are determined to stay until the government agrees to grant them New Zealand residency. They are now so weak and cold that over each of the past three days ambulances have taken some of them to hospital for treatment. After their release they have returned immediately to the protest camp. Protest organiser Jane Yao, a former Chinese journalist involved in the 1989 Tiananmen Square pro-democracy demonstrations in Beijing, said the refugees were scared that the new laws, which came into effect on October 1, would lead to their immediate deportation.

Under the laws, overstayers who fail to meet stringent immigration criteria are subject to deportation, without any right of appeal, if their papers are more than six weeks out of date. The Labour-led government's initiative gives teeth to immigration laws first introduced by the conservative National Party government in 1991. National's Pacific Island Affairs spokesman Arthur Anae welcomed it, saying that his own party's policy had been too easily evaded in the past by "overstayers" who filed repeated appeals. "This gives you six weeks to get the permit. If you don't, you're out," Anae remarked.

The tougher stance on immigrants has been accompanied by an amnesty for an estimated 6,000 to 8,000 people, mainly Pacific Islanders, who have been living illegally in New Zealand for more than five years. To qualify for the amnesty, those currently without legal status will have until March 30 next year to identify themselves and prove that they arrived before last October, that they are married or in a relationship with a New Zealander, or have children born in New Zealand. Those who meet the criteria will be eligible to apply for a two-

year work permit, after which their application for residency is "likely" to be accepted, according to Dalziel.

However, some two-thirds of the estimated 22,400 people thought to be in hiding are excluded from the amnesty, including 5,500 Samoans, 5,000 Tongans, 1,800 Thais and 1,200 British. The majority of these people are targets for immediate deportation. Any who are removed from New Zealand will be denied re-entry for five years, and as a result could also be barred entry to many other Commonwealth countries.

Also excluded from the amnesty are applicants for refugee status, most of whom are Asian. It is this provision that has prompted the refugee protests. Sengkak Yeh, a barrister acting for the refugees, complained that the government was failing to give equal treatment to everybody. "At the moment it is terribly unfair. Most of those who apply for refugee status are from Asian countries while most of those who will get amnesty will be from the Pacific Islands. There seems to be some kind of treatment based on where you come from," he said.

Immigration Minister Dalziel justified the refugees' exclusion with the argument that, in order to prevent them from exploiting the amnesty as a "back door" into New Zealand, she had decided to "exclude them all".

The government only offered the amnesty in the knowledge that any immediate implementation of its tougher new immigration regime would have encountered enormous resistance from immigrant communities. There are many thousands of families, particularly among Pacific Islanders, who have been legally resident in New Zealand for several generations, with close family members who, for a range of bureaucratic, political and legal reasons, have never been able to gain legal status.

In a revealing television comment, Prime Minister Helen Clark admitted that the amnesty had been devised to avoid the public revulsion that would have followed scenes of "children being wrenched from their mother's bosom" as family members were ejected via the nation's airports. Any precipitous anti-immigrant drive would also risk provoking opposition from neighbouring Pacific Island states, which rely heavily on monies repatriated from Pacific workers in New Zealand to their families.

Despite the reactionary intent of its announcement, the government came under pressure from its Australian counterpart, with Australian Liberal Party Immigration Minister Ruddock claiming the amnesty would open the “back door” for “undesirables” to move to Australia. While welcoming Labour’s crackdown on overstayers, he indicated that he was prepared to use the occasion of the amnesty to tighten up trans-Tasman access between the two countries.

According to Ruddock, the Clark government was offering possible citizenship rights to “a group of people who did not meet New Zealand’s selection criteria.” He predicted that those covered by the decision could, under current arrangements, become eligible for New Zealand citizenship and therefore free movement to Australia. Highlighting Australia’s discriminatory immigration policy, Ruddock emphasised that both governments’ objective of a common border and harmonised immigration carried with it implications about “the sort of people entitled to get into New Zealand”.

Dalziel moved quickly to placate the Australians, making it clear that those who eventually gained citizenship under the amnesty would be included within existing immigration quotas. Net immigration figures would not be allowed to blow out, she promised.

Labor’s new measures follow the racist tradition of New Zealand’s immigration laws. In the early 1960’s, governments allowed strictly controlled migration from the Pacific in order to boost the pool of low-paid unskilled workers. Since then, Pacific Islanders wanting to join their families have been forced to struggle against bureaucratic intimidation, police harassment and summary deportation.

During the mid-1970s the Muldoon conservative government invented the term “overstayers” to stigmatise Pacific Islanders who had come to New Zealand to work but because of petty restrictions had failed to obtain work permits and visas. In 1976, many Pacific Island households became victims of “dawn raids” carried out by immigration officials accompanied by police with dogs, searching for people who had been declared “illegal” and subject to deportation. The history of the dawn raids still carries such strong memories for Pacific Islanders that Dalziel was forced to issue an assurance last week that the Labour government had no intention of reinstating them.

Nevertheless, according to a report in the Auckland newspaper the *Weekend Herald*, when an opportunity was provided for people to anonymously check their residency status earlier this month, so many turned up at the Manukau City centre in South Auckland that the police forced the service to close. Olinda Woodroffe, a Samoan lawyer specialising in immigration cases, told the *Herald* that she believed many innocent people would be victimised under the new regime. “Forget the dawn raids and police with dogs, this could be 24 hours a day with nothing more sinister than a single police officer and his breath tester. If you aren’t carrying the right

paperwork, it sounds to me like a night in the cells ‘till you can prove yourself,” she said.

During the past two decades, immigration criteria have been altered to explicitly favour applicants able to bring wealth or proven “business experience” to the country. At the same time, illegal immigrants, particularly ordinary working people, have been increasingly victimised.

In the 1996 elections, the nationalist and populist New Zealand First Party campaigned on a racist anti-immigrant platform, especially targeting recent immigrants from Asia. Accommodating itself to this program, the National Party appointed NZ First MP Tuariki Delamere, a former army officer, as Immigration Minister in the coalition government installed after the election.

The anti-immigrant measures carried out over the past four years have had a dual purpose. On the one hand, big business has insisted that New Zealand’s social welfare, health and education systems cannot “afford” to sustain the largely working class immigrants from the Pacific region, or refugees with low levels of literacy and marketable skills.

On the other, as the economic crisis in New Zealand has deepened, the ruling elite has consciously sought to create divisions within the working class on the basis of race and ethnicity. Increasing attacks on jobs, living standards and social facilities have gone hand-in-hand with the promotion of racial politics, in the form of official support from the entire political establishment—including the unions and the middle class “left”—for Maori nationalism and the politics of “indigenous rights”. The populist and chauvinist appeals by NZ First to Maori and elderly voters in 1996 were only the most extreme form of what has become a universal orientation on the part of all the established parties.

Maori and Pacific Islander workers—who have been hardest hit by the pro-market reforms of the past period—are being encouraged to identify as enemies not the political and economic representatives of New Zealand capital, but each other. The latest initiatives undertaken by the Labour-Alliance Government are aimed at further scapegoating the most vulnerable layers of the working class—immigrants and refugees—for the escalating social and economic problems created by the profit system itself.



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