

New Zealand government to introduce cheap labour scheme for Pacific Island workers

John Braddock
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The New Zealand Labour government is preparing to launch a cheap labour scheme for seasonal workers from the Pacific Islands to fill shortages in the country's commodity-producing industries. The Recognised Seasonal Employer policy, announced last October and due to begin in April, will provide temporary work permits for up to 5,000 Pacific Island workers each year.

The six Pacific countries initially identified to supply the workers are; Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Kiribati, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. Fiji citizens, however, have since been excluded under sanctions imposed by New Zealand on Fiji following the military coup there last December.

Details announced by Immigration Minister David Cunliffe and Employment Minister David Benson-Pope indicate that the scheme has been set up to provide a pool of cheap labour for New Zealand employers. Workers are likely to receive only the minimum adult wage of \$NZ 11.25 per hour, plus basic food and lodging. They will be classified as temporary migrants and forced to return home after seven months. Workers will have to have a specific job offer from a New Zealand employer who qualifies under the scheme. Employers will only be required to pay half the worker's airfare.

The government has promoted the policy as recognising New Zealand's "special relationship with and commitment to the Pacific region", claiming it will lead to the up-skilling of Pacific workers and contribute to "Pacific development". In fact the opposite is the case—New Zealand is using its position as a minor imperial power in the region to cynically exploit desperately impoverished and oppressed Pacific peoples for its own economic ends.

The policy is designed to address chronic labour shortages in the horticulture and viticulture industries,

which depend on the availability of an on-demand, mobile and largely unskilled workforce to pick fruit and harvest crops. According to Cunliffe, the scheme will enable employers to "meet their labour needs through facilitating a productive, accessible workforce." Giving the lie to claims that the plan is a benevolent move to assist Pacific development, Benson-Pope emphasised that it "protects New Zealanders' employment opportunities" by ensuring that employers can only take part "after confirming there are no Kiwis available".

New Zealand governments of all stripes have a long and tainted history of imposing discriminatory and draconian labour and immigration controls over Pacific Islanders. When severe labour shortages developed in the early 1960s, thousands of Pacific workers were recruited for menial and factory jobs, only to subsequently find themselves victimised by hostile and racist immigration laws.

During the 1970s, many Pacific immigrant families were torn apart when police and immigration officials forcibly seized workers and their dependents, classified as "overstayers", in a series of dawn raids, then summarily expelled them from the country. Since then, immigration and work permit policies have been deliberately framed to advantage those with money and business or "entrepreneurial" skills—usually from European or, more recently, Asian backgrounds. Impoverished workers from the nearby Pacific are required to apply for special access via a "non-skilled" category.

The new policy is being implemented after earlier being dismissed by Prime Minister Helen Clark when it was originally put forward by Pacific Forum leaders. At a Forum leaders' retreat in Papua New Guinea in October 2005, representatives of the small Pacific states

claimed that under the so-called “Pacific Plan” moves towards “greater economic co-operation” should include increased mobility for short-term and seasonal workers between the 16 Forum countries. Labour mobility is regarded as essential by Pacific leaders because remittances from expatriate workers are critical for the survival of the island economies and therefore of their own political and social privileges.

At the time, both Clark and Australian Prime Minister John Howard promptly scuttled the suggestion, saying they had “long standing reservations”. Both leaders feared that seasonal workers could develop into a major immigration “headache”, making it more difficult to control the movement of people. “If a case is to be made for ... seasonal permits from the Pacific, our foremost concern would be that people do go home at the end of the permit”, Clark said. “Obviously our first obligation is to our own people”.

The about-face by the Clark government is the product of two factors. Labour shortages within the horticulture and viticulture industries have become acute in recent years, prompting a significant growth in the use of illegal and itinerant foreign labour, with a rising number of prosecutions for work permit and immigration violations. The new plan is an attempt to regularise and control the industry and, by keeping wages low and permits rigidly enforced through toughened compliance measures, to discourage employers from establishing an unofficial black market in seasonal employment.

Strategically, it is being used to reinforce New Zealand’s posturing as the “friendly face” of imperial power in the region. While New Zealand invariably supports Australian political demands and military adventures, it defends its own interests by posturing as a restraining influence on Australian unilateralism.

There are growing concerns within New Zealand ruling circles over the fracturing of long-standing relations within the Pacific and the emergence of regional hostility to the resurgence of Australian and New Zealand neo-colonialism. Writing in the *Dominion Post* newspaper last month, in a comment entitled “Keeping a neighbourly watch”, former leading diplomat Terence O’Brien canvassed various options by which the two dominant nations could continue to “deliver tough messages and insist that hard choices be made” while avoiding accusations of “gross

interference”. According to O’Brien, the fundamental lesson they had to learn was how to provide “expedient insulation”, in order to “avoid damaging head-on political and diplomatic confrontation”.

This is one of the primary goals of the seasonal worker policy. It received immediate praise from Pacific politicians, business leaders and the media. The NZ Pacific Business Council estimated that it would pump remittances of \$US19.8 million to \$23.2 million per annum into participating Pacific Island countries. Anticipating that the scheme will be opened up to others, the *Solomon Star* newspaper editorialised that unless Australia did the same, Pacific Islanders would “continue to see Australia as a country interested only in pursuing its agendas in the region and neglecting the voice of its many small and powerless neighbours”. The Clark government had, the paper concluded, “started a new way of Pacific cooperation [and] we hope Howard will follow suit”.

Any tactical displays of “cooperation” by the Clark government are, however, purely for show. New Zealand military and police personnel have been deployed alongside those from Australia in East Timor, the Solomon Islands and Tonga over the past twelve months, and sanctions have been applied against Fiji. Last month, New Zealand’s commitment to the imposition of brutal colonial rule in the Pacific was emphasised in a major speech by Foreign Minister Winston Peters. Taking a swipe at critics of the US and Australia, Peters said the two countries’ involvement in the Pacific was crucial. “We need the United States, as well as Australia, to be intimately engaged in the Pacific if we are to be successful in our own endeavours,” he declared.



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