

New Zealand First Party attacks Pacific Island immigrants

Matthew Carrington and Tom Peters
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Winston Peters, leader of the right-wing New Zealand First Party, issued a press release on June 26 attacking migrant workers for using the country's Regional Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme as a "backdoor to residency and citizenship."

The scheme brings a maximum of 9,000 workers into the country each year to perform seasonal labour, such as fruit picking, for periods of three to seven months. Most come from impoverished Pacific island countries like Vanuatu, Tonga, Solomon Islands and Samoa. The region has been a source of cheap labour for New Zealand, Australia and other imperialist powers for more than a century.

Seasonal workers are highly exploited, typically working long hours for the minimum wage, often staying in substandard or overcrowded accommodation. Employers are allowed to deduct money for airfares, health insurance, rent and other costs. There are frequent reports of migrant workers being underpaid.

Just 38 people who entered the country through the RSE scheme obtained permanent residency last year. This was still too many for NZ First, however. Peters ranted that the migrants were "semi-skilled with poor or non-existent language skills," asking "are these the sort of people we really want, or for that matter, need?"

This is the latest in a series of attacks on immigrants by NZ First, designed to divert hostility and anger over New Zealand's social crisis by whipping up racism and xenophobia.

A few days earlier, on June 22, Peters declared that "young Kiwi workers are also missing out on low-skilled jobs as foreign students, most of whom want permanent residence, take over in supermarkets, service stations and hotels." He singled out Chinese and Indian students, and demanded that foreign students be banned from working in New Zealand. In February, he attacked

Indian students (see: "New Zealand First Party attacks foreign students").

In another inflammatory statement on April 24, Peters told TV3's Paul Henry—without providing any evidence—that "a stack of" migrant workers in the fruit picking industry "are cheating Inland Revenue [the tax collector] big-time." Peters exclaimed: "They're coming in from everywhere!" He asserted that New Zealand was now the "third most popular destination" for "Chinese crooks."

NZ First has clearly been emboldened by the lack of opposition to its increasingly frequent xenophobic outbursts. None of the parliamentary parties criticised Peters' attack on vulnerable seasonal migrant workers, underscoring their own shift to the right.

Prominent media commentators, such as Paul Henry and RadioLive's Duncan Garner, support NZ First's anti-immigrant campaign. *The Daily Blog*, a liberal outlet funded by several trade unions, also promotes NZ First and publishes regular articles by the party's youth leader, Curwen Rolinson.

Amid the soaring cost of living, particularly due to a shortage of housing and rampant property speculation, the entire political establishment is seeking to scapegoat foreigners. The National Party government recently joined Australia in denouncing refugees from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Myanmar who were trying to reach New Zealand by boat.

The opposition Labour Party, the Greens and the Maori nationalist Mana Party have each adapted to NZ First, a party founded in the 1990s on an anti-immigrant platform directed against the "Asian invasion" of New Zealand. All the opposition parties have blamed the housing crisis on foreign buyers, while Labour has campaigned alongside NZ First to demand the slashing of immigration numbers.

Since 2012, Labour and Mana have joined NZ First in high-profile campaigns against farm sales to Chinese companies. These anti-Chinese campaigns dovetail with moves by Washington to integrate New Zealand into its “pivot to Asia”—an aggressive strategy to encircle and prepare for war against China.

In March, the opposition parties enthusiastically supported Peters’ campaign in a by-election in the seat of Northland, presenting him as a “lesser evil” to National. Mana’s Rueben Taipari Porter praised Peters’ victory, gushing that “he ran an amazing campaign, it was a privilege to participate in that historical election and watch him work.” Porter absurdly claimed that the result “will help return the power of parliament back to the people and secure a better future for our children” (see: “Opposition celebrates anti-immigrant New Zealand First’s by-election victory”).

Mana’s embrace of NZ First demolishes claims by Mana’s pseudo-left supporters—Fightback, the International Socialist Organisation (ISO) and Socialist Aotearoa—that it is a “pro-poor” or “anti-capitalist” party. Like the more openly right-wing Maori Party, with which it is hoping to merge, Mana represents an elite layer of Maori tribal and business leaders. Its program, based on Maori nationalism, is hostile to socialism and the fight to build a unified movement of New Zealand European, Maori, Asian and Pacific workers against the profit system.

Socialist Aotearoa and Fightback remain affiliated with Mana, while the ISO still supports the party despite disaffiliating after Mana’s election defeat last year. None of the groups criticised Mana’s support for NZ First in the March by-election, and they have remained silent on Winston Peters’ recent anti-immigrant rants, including his attacks on Asian students and seasonal workers.

The pseudo-left outfits are profoundly hostile to international socialism. They promote Mana in the hope that the party will improve their own standing within the political establishment. Like Mana, they represent sections of the upper middle class that are sympathetic to NZ First’s right-wing chauvinism.

Workers and youth must defend immigrants, who make up one quarter of New Zealand’s population, from the increasingly vicious attacks by NZ First and its allies. They must demand the right for all working

people to work, study and live anywhere in the world, with full citizenship rights. Such a campaign is bound up with political fight to unify workers in New Zealand and internationally on a socialist perspective to abolish the outmoded profit system and its division of the world into rival nation states.



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