

Push for harsher anti-immigrant measures in New Zealand

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Earlier this month, Michael Woodhouse, the immigration minister in New Zealand's conservative National Party-led government, announced curbs to the country's immigration levels. Prime Minister John Key said the changes followed a regular biennial review and were an adjustment "at the margins" of the intake.

In fact, the decision was in response to a rising clamour in the media and wider political establishment, including the trade unions, for a crackdown on immigration. A reactionary campaign has been whipped up, blaming immigrants and foreigners for sharply rising house prices, youth unemployment and deteriorating social conditions.

No sooner had the government announced the new rules than all the opposition political parties, various trade union spokesmen and the Salvation Army weighed in to condemn the government from the right, declaring that the restrictions were totally inadequate.

Fewer residence approvals will be granted for the next two years, with levels down to 85,000–95,000 from 90,000–100,000. For skilled migrants, the number of points required to qualify will be raised from 140 to 160 points. The number of places available in the capped Family Categories will be slashed from 5,500 to 2,000 per year. Other changes include temporarily closing the Parent Category, thus removing the right for migrants to bring their parents to New Zealand.

Last year, 52,052 people were granted residency, up from 43,085 in 2014. Around half of those came through the Skilled Migrant category. Many of the more popular jobs, such as chefs and retail workers, will no longer qualify for inclusion in the category. David Cooper of Malcolm Pacific Immigration said those without any university qualification would struggle to reach the required 160 points "no matter what experience" they had.

The measures represent a tightening of an already highly regulated immigration system. New Zealand's immigration policy has always been exclusivist. Until the 1970s, an unofficial "White New Zealand" policy operated, initiated and promoted by the unions and the Labour Party, aimed at Chinese workers in particular.

Thousands of so-called "overstayers"—Pacific Island workers and their families—have been subjected to forced evictions. Currently 150 international students from India are fighting summary deportation because the agencies that placed them included false financial information on their study visa applications.

The hostile response by the Green Party to the government's measures was particularly notable. In June, co-leader James Shaw had distanced the Greens from the Labour Party's strident campaign for a cap on numbers, saying that blaming immigrants for the Auckland housing crisis "tears the fabric of New Zealand society."

Last week, however, Shaw said that with rising concerns about "the impact on house prices, and infrastructure" the Greens now proposed to cap overall net migration at 1 percent of the population, including returning New Zealanders. Under this policy, immigration numbers would have been halved this year. Seizing on the Greens' U-turn, Winston Peters, leader of the right-wing anti-immigrant NZ First Party, pointedly asked: "Who will call who racist and xenophobic now?"

The most significant voices in the foul anti-immigrant agitation, however, are the unions, in particular the Unite union, and the trade union-funded *Daily Blog*. The latter denounced the government's immigration cuts as "window dressing" to "our overheated and deeply corrupt immigration system." This position dovetails with *Daily Blog's* regular anti-Chinese rants,

accusing Beijing of starting a “trade war” and trying to colonise New Zealand.

Unite union director Mike Treen wrote on the blog that the 5 percent reduction in immigrant numbers was of “no consequence.” Whatever the government did, Treen said, “you can be sure they will keep on bringing in students and workers on temporary visas for their big business mates to use and abuse.”

The *Daily Blog* and Treen, a former leader of the Pabloite Socialist Action League, have been campaigning intensively against immigration for months. They attempt to clothe reactionary nationalism in “progressive” garb by feigning concern over the increasing pool of “vulnerable and easily exploitable labour” being used by employers to drive down wages.

Treen made an apparent call for “open borders” in a *Daily Blog* post on September 22, saying: “The bosses want us to see the migrant as the enemy undermining our wages and conditions. But there is nothing to gain by excluding them from New Zealand. We need to give the ones here more rights to stand up for themselves. It would then be much harder for the bosses to use migrant labour to undermine wages.”

This is totally hypocritical. All the trade unions, including Unite, have been instrumental in assisting “the bosses” to depress the wages and living standards of the working class—immigrant and non-immigrant alike. Unite has established itself as the main mechanism for disciplining oppressed youth in the fast food, retail, hotel and entertainment sectors. It works closely with some of the most rapacious employers, including Restaurant Brands and Sky City Casino, to enforce their conditions.

To cover its tracks, Unite has conducted high-profile campaigns to pressure the government over youth pay rates and “zero hours” contracts, but the fundamental position of young workers in poorly paid, insecure and highly-exploited work remains unchanged. Unite collaborates with the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment to vet applications by employers seeking to bring in overseas labour, while lobbying the government to crack down on the purported “hundreds of thousands” of temporary work visas, “low-skilled migrants” and foreign students “transitioning” into paid employment.

The pseudo-left groups are intimately tied up with this unprincipled political fraud. Both Socialist

Aotearoa and Fightback have members employed by Unite. In order to distract attention from his union’s anti-immigrant agenda and support for highly restricted migration, Socialist Aotearoa leader and Unite senior organiser Joe Carolan recently organised protests against the impending deportation of the Indian students.

The perspective advanced “personally” by Treen is that workers should be able to live wherever they want with good wages and full rights—but for the time being NZ should end the “inhumane” policy of bringing in temporary migrants who are underpaid and have few rights.

This is completely bankrupt. The demands for more restrictions have nothing to do with defending jobs and basic rights but seek to shift the blame for the social crisis onto the most vulnerable sections of the working class, undermining a united struggle for decent jobs and conditions. Throughout their history the trade unions have consciously sought to redirect workers’ anger into divisive nationalist calls for “jobs for New Zealanders first.”

The only principled position is to fight as a practical matter right now—not at some indeterminate time in the future—for the right of all working people to live and work wherever they want, and with full social rights. This requires an international struggle, uniting workers in New Zealand with those in the Asia-Pacific and throughout the world, in defence of their common interests, on the basis of an anti-capitalist, socialist program.



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