

New Zealand: Report reveals rampant exploitation of migrant workers

Sam Price
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A report published on December 14 examines the rampant exploitation of migrant workers and international students in New Zealand. *Worker Exploitation in New Zealand: A Troubling Landscape* by Dr Christina Stringer, a lecturer at the University of Auckland Business School, is based on 105 interviews with workers from many industries, including construction, dairy, fishing, horticulture, viticulture, hospitality, education and sex work.

The report was commissioned by a coalition of NGOs, including ECPAT Child Alert, Hagar New Zealand, Stand Against Slavery, and The Préscha Initiative, in response to numerous media reports of exploitation and abuse of immigrant workers.

The interviews shed light on appalling conditions faced by these highly vulnerable people, who are bearing the brunt of the assault by the government and the ruling elite on conditions and wages.

One interviewee recalled working 12 hours daily, seven days a week for six months, for only \$5 an hour. The hourly minimum wage is \$15.25. Others said they were denied payment for months, or had excessive wages deducted for food, accommodation and transport. Requests for holiday pay, which workers are entitled to under the law, were met with responses such as: “I will give you holiday pay but you will lose your job.”

Workers also spoke of being charged excessive recruitment fees, being denied an employment contract, having their documents confiscated, as well as verbal, physical and sexual abuse.

One interviewee feared pressing charges with New Zealand police because he was continuously told by his employer, “You don’t know my powers.” Another was threatened by a contractor that if he spoke out “nobody’s gonna find your dead body in New

Zealand.”

The report cites a 2012 story about a liquor store owner who withheld payment to 12 new immigrant workers, paid as little \$4 an hour, and an alleged death threat. It also refers to a US report from the same year which named New Zealand as a major “source country” for sex-trafficking of underage boys and girls.

Because many migrants have no official employment contract, New Zealand authorities often refuse to help them. One interviewee explained: “I went to IRD [the Inland Revenue Department], I went to Labour Department, I went to Immigration, everywhere, to complain against these guys... but no one is doing anything.”

Speaking in parliament, Workplace Relations Minister Michael Woodhouse attempted to dismiss the testimony in Dr Stringer’s report as isolated incidents. He declared that “the vast majority of employers in New Zealand are law-abiding and treat their employees fairly.”

Yet cases of migrant exploitation continue to surface regularly. In August a number of men working at the Taste of Egypt eatery in Richmond were paid just \$400 for up to 77 hours a week. In another recent case, a Lewis Pass motor inn was ordered to pay \$19,000 to a worker who was paid below minimum wage and denied holiday pay for 5 months.

In October the managers of the Masala Indian restaurant chain in Auckland were convicted for paying their employees \$3 an hour for working up to 66 hours a week. On December 14, labour contractor Binde Enterprises was ordered to pay \$430,000 to 75 staff who were underpaid and denied holiday pay.

The publication of the University of Auckland report coincided with the sentencing of Faroz Ali, the first person convicted in New Zealand for human

trafficking. Ali promised 15 Fijians \$900 a week for picking fruit; instead they received little or no pay and were subjected to inhumane conditions.

One woman received only \$25 after working three weeks on an orchard. Another was forced to sleep on the basement floor of her employer's house with three others and no bedding provided. A 21-year-old man worked 12-hour shifts from 5 a.m., every day for three weeks and also slept on the floor. Ali's victims were all made to pay \$4,000 in administrative fees, leaving most of them financially worse off than when they left Fiji.

The opposition Labour Party has feigned concern for migrant workers and hypocritically attacked the National Party government. In fact both parties have repeatedly attacked migrants' wages and conditions.

On December 2, *Newshub* reported that four Indonesian welders employed at the Napier Pine sawmill were being paid only \$3 an hour and sometimes worked from 8 a.m. to 3 a.m. the next morning. An Immigration New Zealand official stated that these extremely low wages were legal because the men worked for "an offshore employer... so we can't dictate the employment conditions or the wages that they're earning." Tens of thousands of people have been employed under these "specific purpose work visas" under successive Labour and National governments.

In 2007 Labour launched the Recognised Seasonal Employer Scheme to bring in low-paid workers from Pacific Island states to fill labour gaps in New Zealand's \$7 billion horticulture and viticulture industries. These workers are frequently forced to live in overcrowded accommodation and are contractually restricted to work for one company or face deportation (see: "New Zealand government to introduce cheap labour scheme for Pacific Island workers").

In 2008 journalist Michael Field began investigations into horrific conditions suffered by foreign fishing crews in New Zealand waters. He and other researchers found routine underpayment of wages, shifts up to 20 hours, beatings and sexual abuse, and cases of workers being fed rotten meat. All of this occurred under National and Labour governments.

Labour's main response to Dr Stringer's report was to echo the anti-Asian, right-wing populist New Zealand First Party's call to slash immigrant numbers. Labour MP Jacinda Arden wrote in a Fairfax Media

column on December 18 that bringing in migrant workers was "creating a vulnerable work force where wages will continue to be compressed."

The editor of the trade union-funded *Daily Blog*, Martyn Bradbury, responded to the report with an anti-immigrant rant. On December 18, he demanded "that we urgently shut down immigration and student visa scams until our infrastructure can be built up to cope with the landslide of desperate people trying to get into our country."

Such attacks on immigrants are designed to divert attention from the fact that the Labour Party and the trade union bureaucracy have no real differences with the government's austerity measures, which have led to soaring social inequality and poverty. For more than a century these nationalist organisations have scapegoated foreigners, especially Chinese people, for the social crisis in order to divide the working class and prevent a unified struggle against the capitalist system, which is the real source of poverty and inequality.



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