

Anti-immigrant campaign intensifies in New Zealand

Tom Peters
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Five months ahead of the September general election, New Zealand's National Party government and the country's opposition parties are all promoting policies to slash immigrant numbers.

On April 19, the government announced a policy to prevent migrants from obtaining a Skilled Migrant Visa if they earn below New Zealand's median annual income of \$49,000. The change means thousands of low-paid migrant workers may struggle to obtain a visa. They will find it harder to obtain permanent residency, because their work will no longer count as "skilled."

The change follows cuts to visa numbers announced last October. The skilled migrant category was tightened and the right of migrants to bring parents to New Zealand was removed.

The anti-immigrant measures are part of the shift in ruling circles throughout the world toward more extreme forms of nationalism, aimed at dividing the working class by scapegoating foreigners for the worsening economic and social crisis. The Trump administration in the United States is leading the way with its "America first" rhetoric and vicious attacks on Muslims and Mexican immigrants.

The announcement in New Zealand came a day after the Australian government unveiled restrictions on immigration, including tougher English language tests and a requirement that migrants show "allegiance" to Australia and unspecified "Australian values." This lays the basis for the interrogation and surveillance of migrants and increased discrimination on the grounds of nationality, religion or politics.

In both countries, the entire political establishment is clamouring for greater attacks on the rights of immigrants. New Zealand's opposition Labour Party denounced the National government from the right for only "tinkering" with immigration settings.

Labour Party leader Andrew Little described the current policy as "open slather," telling the media he wanted immigration cut by "tens of thousands." The government has not given any estimate of how many migrants would be barred under its proposed changes. For the 12 months to February, net migration was 71,333. Little told TV3 he wanted this slashed by as many as 50,000 people.

Little's statement was supported by Labour's new deputy leader Jacinda Ardern, who has appeared at anti-Trump rallies and is falsely portrayed as a "progressive" figure.

Little told the *New Zealand Herald* it was too "easy [for employers] to get somebody from overseas and keep locals out of work." He said Auckland, the country's largest city, where a third of the population was born overseas, was "absolutely packed ... You see it in the congestion. You see it in not enough housing. You see it in overcrowded schools."

In fact, the social crisis is the result of the pro-business agenda pursued by successive governments, including the 1999–2008 Labour government. Every wing of the political establishment supports cutbacks to the funding of basic services and has encouraged property speculation, pushing up the cost of housing. Recent years have seen thousands of redundancies in the public service, local councils and state-owned companies like Solid Energy and New Zealand Post, with no opposition from Labour and the trade union bureaucracy.

Labour has joined the overtly anti-Asian New Zealand First Party in blaming migrants for the social inequality produced by nearly a decade of austerity. At a recent meeting of the senior citizens' group Grey Power in Upper Hutt, NZ First leader Winston Peters declared: "Ninety-one thousand young New Zealanders

not in training, not in education, not employed.... Why should they compete with someone from Shanghai?"

Labour and New Zealand First have sought to whip up xenophobia against migrants from China, India and the Pacific region. Like Trump, NZ First has also demonised Muslim immigrants as potential terrorists.

The Labour Party hopes to form a coalition government with NZ First and the Green Party, which wants a similarly drastic cut to immigration. In an interview posted on the web site the *Spinoff* on March 31, Greens co-leader Metiria Turei said her party would not welcome a visit by Trump, calling him a misogynist and racist.

However, the Greens have no principled opposition to racism and xenophobia. In the same interview Turei and fellow co-leader James Shaw declared they were happy to collaborate in government with NZ First. Turei noted that Peters had "racist views" but added: "I really like him ... he's given me really good political advice in the past ... I admire his tenacity, his staying put. For a Maori man in New Zealand politics, he's been there for a really long time."

The trade union bureaucracy has likewise scapegoated foreigners for poor wages and unemployment. A statement by the Council of Trade Unions feigned sympathy for exploited migrant workers but praised the government's policy announcement and said there was "a need [for immigration] to be reined in to better protect New Zealand workers and those looking for work."

This nationalist outlook is reflected on the *Daily Blog*, which is funded by several trade unions. In a vicious anti-Chinese article on March 28, editor Martyn Bradbury declared: "The last bloody thing we need is MORE Chinese tourism bringing more hungry speculators into a country crippled by a lack of infrastructure investment and housing crisis."

Echoing NZ First, Bradbury accused the government of being "wedded and compromised personally to wealthy Chinese interests ... National have sold our economy to China and our mass surveillance to America."

These ludicrous and racist denunciations are intended to divide workers along ethnic and national lines and subordinate them to parties of big business and the pro-capitalist unions. These same organisations have spent decades enforcing redundancies and wage cuts in the

name of making New Zealand businesses "internationally competitive."

Labour and its allies are stoking anti-Chinese sentiment in order to pressure the government to further strengthen its support for US war preparations against China. The National Party maintains a close military and intelligence alliance with the US, and supports Washington's military build-up in Asia, but has been reluctant to openly denounce China. Labour and NZ First have both called for more military spending to improve "interoperability" with US forces.

Workers can only defend their interests if they reject the efforts of the political elite and the unions to divide workers based on race and nationality. A campaign must be waged to defend immigrants: workers should be allowed to live in whatever country they choose, with full citizenship rights. This is an essential part of the fight to unite the working class internationally against the capitalist system, which is the source of poverty, inequality and war.



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