New Zealand government introduces class-based immigration restrictions

Tom Peters
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On October 7, New Zealand's Labour Party-led coalition government announced draconian class-based restrictions on immigration.

From February 2020, the government will reopen the Parent Category visa nearly four years after the previous National Party government suspended it, blocking thousands of parents from joining their adult children in New Zealand.

Under changes to visa requirements, however, a resident or citizen must earn over $106,000 a year to bring one parent to NZ, or $159,000—more than three times the median salary—to bring two parents. Before 2016, the income required to bring one parent was $65,000.

Officials estimate that 85 percent of parents currently on the waiting list will be ineligible for residency under the new rules. In addition to the income restrictions, admissions under the Parent Category will be capped at 1,000 per year, compared with 5,500 before the scheme was suspended.

The crackdown mirrors attacks on immigrants and refugees and the promotion of right-wing nationalism throughout the world. The Trump administration has reduced the US refugee intake to 18,000, its lowest level in history, imposed class-based restrictions to block millions of poor migrants, and imprisoned tens of thousands in concentration camps.

The government of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, with its right-wing, anti-immigrant partner NZ First playing a major role, is part of the same reactionary tendency. NZ First leader and Foreign Minister Winston Peters, who has frequently ranted against Asian and Muslim immigrants, told the media he had pushed within the government for the new immigration restrictions.

The entire political establishment, however, is seeking to scapegoat foreigners for social inequality, which continues to soar under the Labour-led government. Tens of thousands of people are homeless due to rampant speculation by property investors. One in four children lives in poverty and Auckland City Mission estimates that one in 10 people suffers from food insecurity. Teachers, nurses and doctors have held mass strikes to protest the crisis caused by under-staffing and under-funding in schools and hospitals.

The ruling elite is attempting to sow divisions based on nationality and ethnicity to stop the development of a unified struggle of the working class. New Zealand is a very diverse country, with more than 20 percent of its five million inhabitants born overseas, including in India, China and Pacific island nations such as Tonga and Samoa.

Several migrant organisations denounced the government for barring members of these communities from bringing their parents to New Zealand. June Ranson, chairwoman of the NZ Association for Migration and Investment, told TVNZ the government's stance was that "ordinary people aren't allowed to bring in their parents and it's basically for the very privileged few of the rich."

New Zealand Chinese Youth Federation president James Sun said the policy was particularly harsh for immigrants from the one-child generation, whose parents had no other children to support them in China.

Speaking to Radio NZ, Harry Chen, a bus driver in Auckland, said, "New Zealand's economy is not going well. I'm earning less than before and the cost of living is high. Now the requirements for earnings has been raised to such a high level, I don't think me and my partner can ever get all of our parents over."

The Auckland-based *Indian Weekender* said there were "huge emotions within the wider communities as

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many found the whopping salary requirement… unreasonable." Its October 9 editorial called the Labour-NZ First policy "outrageous and insulting to the hard-working migrants in this country." It noted the National Party's "deafening silence," i.e., tacit agreement with the government.

The parent visa change is only the latest attack on immigrants. In August, it was reported that the number of people gaining New Zealand residency dropped from 51,750 in 2016 to 34,881 in the 12 months to July 2019, the lowest level in two decades. Stricter residency criteria have forced tens of thousands of people onto temporary visas, making them more vulnerable to exploitation and deportation.

The Ardern government has also restricted the right of foreign students to work in New Zealand, contributing to an estimated 2,500 fewer foreign student enrolments in 2019. The Tertiary Education Union, reflecting the nationalism of the trade union bureaucracy, demanded further cuts in August, saying universities were "over-reliant" on Chinese students.

These policies demolish the media propaganda following the March 15 Christchurch terrorist attack, depicting Ardern's government as a beacon of "kindness" and humanitarianism in contrast to Trump, Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, Hungary's Viktor Orban and others. In fact, the fascist Brenton Tarrant, who massacred 51 people in two mosques, used nationalist and anti-Muslim rhetoric similar to that of NZ First, which is part of the government.

The Greens' immigration spokesperson Golriz Ghahraman made a mealy-mouthed criticism of the new policy, tweeting: "Restoring parent visas is a good move, but… reserving the right for the wealthy is unfair." Only days before on October 4, Ghahraman had heaped praise on the government for removing, two years into its term, a racist ban on refugees from Africa and the Middle East. "We're proud to be part of a government that is demonstrating its commitment to the idea that human rights are universal—regardless of race, nationality or religion," she said.

In fact, New Zealand's annual refugee intake of just 1,000, rising to 1,500 next year, is one of the lowest in the world. In May, the Ardern government announced $25 million to support the Australian government's anti-democratic campaign to prevent asylum seekers reaching the country by boat.

In their 2017 election campaigns, both Labour and NZ First, supported by the Greens, scapegoated foreigners, especially Chinese people, for the housing bubble, low wages and pressure on public services. Ardern promised to slash annual immigration by up to 30,000 per year (about 40 percent).

Shortly before the election, sections of the media, backed by NZ First and supporters of the union bureaucracy, launched an anti-Chinese campaign directed against National Party MP Jian Yang, who was accused by pro-US academic Anne-Marie Brady of being an agent of Beijing. The attack was aimed at aligning New Zealand more closely with Washington's war preparations against China.

The government and opposition parties are positioning themselves for another election next year that will be dominated by anti-immigrant xenophobia, nationalism and anti-Chinese propaganda.

The Socialist Equality Group (NZ) calls on working people to reject the toxic nationalist and anti-immigrant politics that are exploited to divide workers, prepare for war, and divert attention from the real source of the social crisis: the capitalist system. The working class must demand that everyone have the right to live anywhere in the world, with full democratic rights and protection from exploitation.

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