

Paralysed woman faces life-threatening deportation from New Zealand to Tonga

Harry Hall, Tom Peters
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In a case which highlights the increasing brutality of New Zealand's immigration system, a paralysed Tongan woman and her family are due to be deported on January 31, despite doctors warning the mother of six could die.

The anti-immigrant policies of the Labour Party-NZ First-Greens government are part of the same lurch into right-wing and nationalist policies by governments throughout the world. As in the US, Australia and Europe, immigrants in New Zealand are being demonised and scapegoated by the entire political establishment for the social crisis caused by capitalism, including low wages, the housing shortage and underfunded healthcare and education services.

Taipaleti Vaeatangitau was injured in 2015 while playing netball in Tonga, a small and impoverished Pacific island country of about 100,000 inhabitants. Lacking appropriate medical care, she was referred to a neurosurgeon in Auckland and her family sold their possessions to fund her relocation and operation, which cost \$27,000. The Tongan government refused to pay for the operation.

Vaeatangitau was diagnosed with a severely compressed spinal cord, which would render her paraplegic within months. Surgery had a chance to restore her mobility, but also could cause paraplegia. The surgery failed, with Vaeatangitau waking up paraplegic.

Her husband now provides her with full time care, while also taking care of the couple's two school-aged children, one of whom recently became a prefect at Tamaki College in Auckland. Family members have continued to pay for Vaeatangitau's medical treatment, including the hire of a bed with a hoist and sling to transfer her to her wheelchair.

When the family's visas expired in 2018, they

applied to New Zealand's Immigration and Protection Tribunal (IPT) for visas to stay in their new home. Radio NZ reported that the family's doctor wrote to the tribunal, saying "all the vital equipment, specialist care and ongoing care that [the wife] critically needs for her daily care are not available in Tonga" and deportation would be "putting a death toll on her already debilitated life." A second doctor, based in Auckland, wrote that her health faced a "significantly increased risk of deterioration" in Tonga.

Despite acknowledging the "exceptional humanitarian circumstances" of the family's situation, the IPT's decision released early this year stated that Vaeatangitau could not receive a resident or temporary visa because of her ill health. The tribunal noted that her "medical treatment, care and rehabilitation in Tonga will not be as good as in New Zealand," but flatly rejected this as a reason to allow the family to stay. It declared that the family "seek to remain in New Zealand to take advantage of medical and social benefits clearly not intended" under the terms of the original medical visa.

There has been almost no criticism of the tribunal's ruling from the media or the political establishment. In an interview with Radio New Zealand, immigration solicitor Alastair McClymont defended the ruling and the system under which Pacific Islanders can only receive temporary visas for medical treatment. McClymont said allowing Vaeatangitau to stay would "undermine the whole integrity of that policy."

Vaeatangitau's case is similar to that of Sanil Kumar, who was deported to Fiji in 2014 despite warnings that he could die. Kumar was working in New Zealand when he fell ill and required a kidney transplant. He needed haemodialysis, but could only access peritoneal dialysis, a less effective and riskier treatment, after

being deported. Kumar would be allowed back into New Zealand for a kidney transplant only if his family could pay for his costs, but they could not raise the money in time. They had assembled around \$120,000 of the \$130,000 cost when Kumar died.

At the time, Labour Party immigration spokesman Rajen Prasad called Kumar's deportation "utterly heartless" and called on the National Party government to "show more compassion." Now, however, the Labour-led government is doing the same thing: deporting a seriously ill person despite warnings she may die.

The case exposes the complete fraud of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's media image of "kindness." A few days before the deportation was reported, Ardern was named 2019's "Pacific Person of the Year" by the Fiji-based *Islands Business* magazine, which said "she always tries to bring people together and [is] not too divisive."

In reality, the Labour Party has adopted the anti-immigrant policies of its right-wing coalition partner, the viciously xenophobic NZ First. Both parties have repeatedly scapegoated Chinese and Asian immigrants, in particular, for the worsening social crisis.

Green Party MP Golriz Ghahraman criticised the deportation of Vaeatangitau on Twitter, saying: "A policy where \$\$ trumps humanitarian action is inconsistent with Aotearoa's [New Zealand's] core values."

Such statements are thoroughly hypocritical. The Greens are part of the current government and advocate discrimination against immigrants based on a Malthusian notion of keeping the population "sustainable." Before the 2017 election the Green Party criticised the then-National Party government for not cutting immigration sufficiently and called for a strict cap in order to limit population growth to 1 percent per year.

After criticism in the media and from migrant advocates, this target was removed in mid-2017. The current Greens policy, however, calls for bringing in "migrants whose skills will help build a low-emissions economy that lifts living standards"—in other words, favouring wealthier professionals over low-paid workers.

The deportation of Vaeatangitau and her family is one of several recent cases showing the cruelty of the

immigration system. The *New Zealand Herald* has reported several cases of couples being separated by immigration law, including a student whose same-sex Turkish partner was denied a visa, making the couple unable to get married in New Zealand. In another case, a pregnant woman whose Indian fiancé was deported became so stressed that she suffered a miscarriage.

An imperialist country, New Zealand exploits people from Tonga and other Pacific countries as a source of cheap labour, particularly for the agriculture industry. At the same time discriminatory class-based immigration restrictions prevent low-paid workers from gaining permanent residency. Last year there were even reports that teachers in Auckland were denied residency, despite a nationwide shortage of teachers.

The Ardern government recently introduced new restrictions so that only the very richest migrants already living in New Zealand can bring their parents to live with them. An estimated 85 percent of parents on the immigration waiting list became ineligible due to the change.

The policy of deporting people who could die, rather than providing life-saving medical treatment, is a damning indictment of capitalism, which places the needs of the profit system ahead of basic human rights. The Socialist Equality Group calls on the working class to defend the unconditional right of people to live and work wherever they want in the world, with full access to healthcare and other citizenship rights.



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