

More migrants speak out against New Zealand's visa-processing delays

Tom Peters
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Thousands of immigrants to New Zealand are facing endless delays to the processing of residency applications under the Skilled Migrant Category (SMC).

The Facebook group Migrants NZ has launched a petition demanding that a backlog of more than 15,000 applications, many lodged more than a year ago, be processed urgently by Immigration New Zealand (INZ). More than 30,000 people are waiting to learn whether they will be granted residency or forced to leave the country (see: “Migrants challenge visa-processing delays by New Zealand authorities”).

The political establishment and sections of the media, meanwhile, are ramping up their anti-immigrant campaign. The aim is to divert anger over growing social inequality and the wave of job losses triggered by the coronavirus pandemic by stoking nationalism and xenophobia.

Stuff reported on June 29 that INZ officials told a group of harvesting workers in Marlborough classed as “essential” during the recent COVID-19 lockdown that they should now “go home.” Like thousands of foreign workers who have lost their jobs, they are ineligible for welfare payments and are surviving on food parcels. “It feels like they used us, and now they’re not even giving us a chance to stay,” one said.

On July 1, legislation to restrict immigrants’ access to pensions passed its first reading in parliament. Drafted by the right-wing nationalist NZ First Party, a partner in the Labour Party-led coalition government, the Bill would require someone to be a New Zealand resident for 20 years before being eligible for superannuation. This is double the current requirement of 10 years.

The Labour Party and the opposition National Party supported the Bill, while the Greens voted against it.

The Green Party has also voiced criticisms of the SMC visa-processing delays and stated that it “disagrees” with capping immigrant numbers.

Such statements are deeply hypocritical. The Green Party is a crucial part of the coalition government. It has campaigned for years in an alliance with NZ First and Labour, and hopes to again be included in a re-elected Labour government following the September election.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has received a number of letters from migrants describing the stress and hardship caused by the delay in processing their residency applications. The following excerpts have been edited for length and clarity. All names have been changed at the request of the correspondents.

Rebecca applied for residency 17 months ago and has not heard back. Recently, “due to COVID-19, the company where I worked for three years decided to downsize and make staff redundant.”

Although Rebecca felt the process was unfair, she believed that “as a temporary work visa holder being made redundant in the middle of a lockdown, I couldn’t raise a legal complaint because I would lose my legal migratory status and I realised the only person who could help me at that stage was my employer.”

The company exploited the situation, including by making Rebecca work unpaid days. She was eventually offered a short-term contract with reduced hours and wages.

“I am really desperate, hopeless and feel humiliated going to my workplace,” she said. “I worked really hard to settle and build a life here, paying taxes for four years and investing more than \$5,000 to get my residence.” INZ has collected millions of dollars in fees from visa applicants, none of which has been refunded despite the processing delays.

“I can’t stop thinking if I should start arranging to get a repatriation flight ASAP to avoid spending all my savings here, or if I should stay as long as I can to finally get my residency. INZ never [makes clear] the estimated timeframe for this, and this makes all migrants’ lives very uncertain.”

Greta came to New Zealand on a student visa in 2011 and was joined by her husband and their young daughter in 2015. Greta’s husband is a truck driver who was deemed an essential worker during the lockdown. They applied for residency in December 2018 and had to wait until January 2020 before being assigned a case officer by INZ. They have heard nothing since then.

“That’s not the end of our story,” Greta wrote. “My son was born in NZ in 2016. He fell sick very seriously in 2017 [and] spent four to five 5 months in hospital, including 2.5 months on life-support.” He suffers from scoliosis, a condition affecting the spinal cord.

“Now we are struggling with that. [We] keep going to the hospital and working full time with stress and fear about our residential status. We don’t get any kind of help from the government as we are not permanent residents.”

Greta is worried about “what will happen to my son’s medical treatment as he needs spinal cord surgery, which is quite major surgery. My daughter is 11-years-old and she is stressed as well. She keeps asking when we will get residency.”

Carol, a tattoo artist, moved to New Zealand five years ago. She has a five-month-old daughter and wants to settle down with her partner, a New Zealander. However, there is “still no news about my residency, nearly 15 months after sending my application! When I applied I was told that it could take between six and nine months total.”

“This eternal waiting is very frustrating, and is costing us a lot,” Carol wrote. She has spent \$8,000 on her application and related costs, including the services of an immigration advisor.

“I wake up every day not knowing what to do and how to make a good future for my family. This is creating a lot of stress. My partner needs to work hard for us and I feel so useless because even if I want, I can’t work and this is affecting my mental health.

“Like me, another 30,000 people are screaming for help. We worked hard, paid our taxes and our fees to

INZ. We met all the criteria for residency and now are living in this limbo and nobody cares... Migrants are hard workers and always have been and we feel like we are just being used for our hard work with nothing in return.”



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