Campaign continues against New Zealand visa processing delays

Tom Peters
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There is growing opposition to the New Zealand government's mistreatment of migrants, including its refusal to process residency applications for tens of thousands of people.

A petition with nearly 4,000 signatures, promoted by the Facebook group Migrants NZ is being presented to parliament this week. It calls on the Labour Party-led government to process more than 15,000 applications for Skilled Migrant Category (SMC) visas, affecting about 30,000 people.

Many have been waiting a year or longer and fear that they may be unable to stay in New Zealand, despite meeting all the relevant criteria and having spent thousands of dollars in fees and other costs. According to the Immigration New Zealand (INZ) website, as of June 30 the department was still allocating applications it received in December 2018 for case officers to begin processing them.

Another petition, promoted by the Pacific Leadership Forum, representing various community organisations, asks the government to "provide pathways for overstayers under compassionate grounds to gain permanent residency in New Zealand." It has gained more than 10,000 signatures.

On July 12, dozens of migrants attended rallies in Auckland and Wellington. Speaking in Auckland, Green Party candidate Ricardo Menéndez March criticised the visa processing delays and said it was "shameful" that temporary migrant workers who are unemployed cannot access welfare payments.

The Greens, however, are part of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's government, which includes Labour and the right-wing nationalist NZ First Party. Like others throughout the world, the government is scapegoating immigrants for job losses in order to divert rising anger among workers over social inequality, particularly as an election approaches on September 19.

Despite NZ First's unpopularity, Labour and the Greens allow it to exercise considerable power in the coalition. NZ First leader and deputy prime minister Winston Peters has told jobless migrants to "go home."

Labour has adopted many of NZ First's anti-immigrant policies, including limiting migrants' access to superannuation and imposing new class-based immigration restrictions. At NZ First's conference held last weekend, Peters demanded greater restrictions, including reducing immigration to 15,000 people per year, down from more than 50,000 last year.

The government's actions are jeopardising migrants' health and basic human rights. *Newsroom* reported on July 16 that a group of seasonal agricultural workers from the Solomon Islands had complained to the Labour Inspectorate that they had no food and were going hungry, and allegedly faced bullying from their employer. Pick Hawke's Bay had reportedly stopped paying them and they couldn't access welfare.

Anna, who is from Germany and is part of the group Migrants NZ, told the *World Socialist Web Site* many people waiting for a visa were afraid to criticise the government, or even sign a petition, in case they were "blacklisted." She continued: "It makes me sad and angry at the same time, how scared people are of the whole system."

She criticised Immigration Minister Iain Lees-Galloway for failing to explain the SMC residency applications backlog in media interviews. "Recently we started commenting on every single one of his Facebook posts. Especially as Labour's election campaign slogan is 'Let's keep moving,' we keep suggesting that the queue should keep moving," she said.

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Anna noted that a six-month extension to temporary work visas announced by Lees-Galloway this month did not cover partners and children of visa-holders, who have to apply separately or leave the country. She said the extension was “not so much to benefit the actual visa holders, it’s more to satisfy the business owners,” who needed time to find replacements for migrant workers who could still be forced to leave.

Many SMC applicants have children whose lives are in limbo. The WSWS received a letter from a migrant whose son has finished school and wants to study to become a doctor, but the family can’t afford the extremely high fees charged to non-residents.

They wrote: “It’s too much stress to tell my son that we can’t afford to help him pay the international fee of $35,000 a year for the next six years,” more than double the fee for domestic students. “He had chances of getting a scholarship… but he needs to be a resident in order to apply by early next year. I’m losing all hopes if this queue doesn't move at a faster pace.”

The WSWS also spoke with Angela (not her real name), who moved from South Africa three years ago with her two sons. Angela was recently made redundant from her job as a systems manager and she is looking for a new job.

She submitted her residency application 14 months ago and has heard nothing since. When she applied, the INZ website said the longest waiting time was nine months.

Angela told the WSWS: “I’ll do anything to stay in New Zealand, basically. The way things are going in South Africa, I’d not like to go back [because of] the violence, and the pandemic is just starting. With 57 million people and extreme poverty situations, it’s going to prove disastrous.”

South Africa is the fifth-worst hit country, with 350,879 cases and nearly 5,000 confirmed deaths. “To send people back to countries where there are no healthcare systems, they are exposed, it’s really like a death sentence,” she said.

“What scares me most is that if I had to go back, my 15-year-old son would have to come with me. I wouldn’t be able to look after him, I have nowhere to go. Especially with the pandemic, there’s no way I’d be able to secure a job. I keep saying to people, that would be the end of me. I’ve made this move to New Zealand, quite frankly, not for myself but for the future of my kids.”

Angela said: “A lot of migrants don’t speak up. I know a couple of people working in dreadful circumstances and the employers aren’t nice to them. They keep quiet because of the fear of having to go back to their country.”

She said she understood the government had to take care of its citizens, “but we can also be seen as future citizens... Don’t look at us as migrants, look at us as human beings. We’re all trying to plan our lives, but there’s no assurance. All we’re asking for is to be treated fairly.”

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