Australia: International students and foreign visa holders face major social crisis

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A recent online survey has further exposed the desperate situation facing temporary migrants in Australia who have been abandoned by state and federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conducted by Unions New South Wales between March 2020 and mid-May, the survey of 5,342 respondents is the first large-scale data set of temporary migrants conducted since the coronavirus crisis began.

According to the Department of Home Affairs, there are almost 2.03 million temporary residents in Australia, down from 2.17 million in March. Most are denied access to meagre wage and unemployment subsidies.

The survey was predominantly answered by those on student visas (67 percent), with 10 percent as holiday makers and 23 percent in other categories, such as bridging visas. Half of the respondents identified as casual workers, 33 percent as part-time and only 15 percent as full-time.

The survey revealed that 65 percent of temporary migrants lost their job during the pandemic. Another 23 percent have had their hours reduced. The most heavily affected sector was the entertainment and tourism industry with 75 percent of foreign visa employees in the sector being thrown out of work, followed by both hospitality and beauty therapists with 74 percent each.

The figure was 35 percent for food-delivery drivers and 28 percent for those employed in health and aged care. Working holiday makers (or backpackers) experienced a 77 percent loss in jobs.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, visa holders are more likely to live in capital cities. Some 92 percent of those on student visas are in urban centres. The mass job cuts, combined with the high costs of living, has consigned many to a hand-to-mouth existence.

Eighty-seven percent of respondents reported difficulty paying their weekly expenses. Some 61 percent were relying on savings which would be exhausted in a matter of weeks. Eleven percent did not have enough savings for a week of expenses.

Many now face the threat of homelessness, with 30 percent unable to pay rent and anticipating eviction. Four percent were already effectively homeless. Almost a quarter (23 percent) were sharing a bedroom to save costs, and 9 percent indicated that housemates had left their accommodation, driving up rent costs to an unpayable amount.

A growing number are going hungry. Forty-three percent said they were skipping meals on a regular basis to reduce costs and were relying on friends to survive. Footage on Twitter shows a City of Melbourne food voucher line for international students extending hundreds of metres. The $200 food vouchers were limited for use at the Queen Victoria Market as part of a publicity campaign, and students were urged to share pictures of their shopping and meals on social media.

Renata Tavares Silva, a Brazilian student now unemployed in Sydney, told the Special Broadcasting Corporation last month that he was “simply terrified. Each way you look you feel like ‘I don’t have anywhere to go.’ This year when I’m about to finish school, I simply lose my job, how will I survive?”

International students are required to pay full-course fees upfront and provide a significant source of revenue for the Australian corporate elite and its governments, which treat them as cash cows. In the 2018–19 financial year, international education contributed $37.6 billion, the largest service export and the third largest export in total, behind iron ore and coal.

The last three years (2017–19) have seen a large

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growth in international student numbers, 12.6 percent, 11.4 percent and 9.7 percent respectively. The students, however, are excluded from most forms of official assistance.

Ninety-nine percent of participants reported that they were not receiving any form of income support from the government or from charity organisations.

At the outset of the pandemic, Prime Minister Scott Morrison declared that those visa holders without the means to survive should, “make their way home.” In practice, this stance has been supported by the federal Labor Party opposition and state governments, Liberal and Labor alike, which have done nothing for visa holders.

At the same time, federal stimulus packages have been granted to the corporate elite totalling more than $314 billion in a bid to shore up profits. Recent revelations confirm that hundreds of millions of dollars from the federal JobKeeper subsidies, a $1,500 fortnightly payment supposedly intended for employees, have been pocketed by some of the country’s largest companies as they axed thousands of jobs.

The unions enforced the pro-business response to the pandemic, closely collaborating with the governments and corporations. They have compelled many workers to remain on the job in unsafe conditions, and have overseen the destruction of hundreds of thousands of positions. The unions are centrally involved in the ruling elite’s attempts to use the pandemic for a further corporate overhaul of working conditions and industrial relations.

The unions’ posture of sympathy towards foreign visa holders, which accompanied the release of the survey, are a sham. The unions are directly responsible for the gutting of full-time employment that has resulted in massive rates of casualisation. They have signed countless enterprise agreements with businesses, slashing the already meagre wages and conditions of the most exploited workers, including foreign visa holders.

The plight of visa holders and international students is one of the sharpest expressions of the social crisis confronting the entire working class.

Prior to the pandemic, some 40 to 50 percent of the workforce was employed on a casual or contract basis. Many of them have now lost their job and confront a disaster with the winding-back of even the limited subsidies introduced this year.

The elimination of tens of thousands of full-time jobs was initiated by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments in the 1980s and 90s. Working with the unions they deregulated the economy, and oversaw the destruction of whole sections of manufacturing. The Labor governments’ abolished free university education, introducing upfront fees for international students, and then rolling-out deferred fees for domestic students.

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