

Migrant workers demand right to return to their homes in New Zealand

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15 November 2020

Thousands of migrant workers who lived and worked in New Zealand have been trapped outside the country since the borders were closed in March. Unable to return to their jobs and their lives, many are facing severe financial distress and some have been separated from their partners and other family members.

The Labour Party-led government's cruel treatment of migrant workers exposes the media propaganda in New Zealand and internationally portraying Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern as the embodiment of kindness and compassion. In reality, Labour and its former coalition partner, the right-wing nationalist NZ First, have sought to scapegoat migrants for the worsening social crisis.

Thousands of migrants still in New Zealand, who have lost their jobs due to the economic crisis triggered by the pandemic, have been denied access to unemployment benefits. Former Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters, the NZ First leader, told them to "go home" because the system would not support them, despite the government giving tens of billions of dollars in subsidies to businesses.

Meanwhile, nearly 30,000 people who have applied for residency have faced delays of a year or more due to a deliberate slowdown of visa processing by Immigration New Zealand. Many now fear they may not be allowed to stay in the country.

In the lead-up to the October 17 election, which saw Labour return to office with an overall majority of the votes, the major parties and the media maintained a virtual silence on the fate of migrants. Immigration policy was not discussed in the four televised debates between Ardern and National Party leader Judith Collins.

In a sign of the continuing brutal treatment of migrants, the *New Zealand Herald* reported on October

28 that Minister for Immigration Kris Faafoi had denied residency to Sanaul Elahi, who was injured during the fascist terrorist attack in Christchurch on March 15, 2019. This was despite a recommendation from the ministry's own Immigration and Protection Tribunal that Elahi and his family should be allowed to stay in the country. Elahi originally moved to New Zealand in 2015 and had been working as a halal butcher.

A petition recently submitted to the New Zealand parliament urged the government to "to allow migrants with current New Zealand visas who are stuck offshore to either re-enter the country, or extend their visas."

It stated: "Thousands of us are ordinarily residents and have spent almost a year away from home, jobs and in some cases our partners and kids. New Zealand is our home. Our lives are there, as are our families, jobs, careers, homes and friends. Please let hard working people return home. It's been a long time without access to our belongings." The petition so far has about 1,700 signatures.

Migrants have also held demonstrations, both in New Zealand and internationally, against the Ardern government's policies. On Tuesday, migrants will rally in New Delhi to demand that "all workers normally resident in New Zealand, be allowed to return the same as citizens."

NZ citizens are allowed to return and must spend two weeks in hotels that have been repurposed as quarantine facilities.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with Belu, who had lived in New Zealand for six years. She and her husband, and their baby, had travelled to her family's home in Argentina to get married when New Zealand closed its border. Belu has been separated from her husband, who is from India and was unable to stay

in Argentina due to its visa regulations.

“We started our life, our family in New Zealand and then with no notice, we can’t go home,” she said. “It’s very tough because in this country or in India we have to start again from zero... It’s the middle of a crisis, we don’t have a house, we don’t have our belongings, we don’t have anything.” The couple was still paying \$600 a week rent for their house in New Zealand, and had received some assistance from their employer thanks to the government’s temporary wage subsidy scheme, until it expired in September.

Belu believed that the government “don’t want to lose votes. If they say: all the immigrants can come back, all the Kiwis who don’t want immigrants or don’t know the situation will not vote for them. I don’t understand why the media never asks [the government] about it. It’s a very big thing. We are thousands, with our families.”

She said her employer was “desperate” because “they see the job’s there to be done and nobody to do it. So why if they need me so much can’t I come back?” She explained that she was extremely stressed. “I haven’t slept eight hours for the last eight months. Thank god I have my mum with me and my baby, because otherwise I don’t know how other people do it.”

The WSWS also spoke with Swarna, who is currently stuck in India, unable to return to her home in Auckland. Like many others, she had been given a large amount of money by her parents to study and work in New Zealand, which she had been repaying through remittances. “My parents are both retired now, they are unable to pay the money,” she said. “Any moment the bank will start sending me letters. They can take away my home, the only home I have in India.”

Swarna had been in New Zealand for two years when the pandemic hit; she had been working as a security guard and in a public hospital, sometimes up to a total of 72 hours a week. “[Migrant workers] don’t eat properly, we don’t sleep properly, we just work like a dog... we are just working, working, working,” she explained.

She had to return to India to visit her mother, who was seriously ill, just before NZ shut its borders in March. Swarna had applied for an exemption from Immigration New Zealand (INZ) to return to New Zealand, but was rejected with no explanation.

Swarna described the government’s “exemption” criteria—supposedly allowing some migrants to return—as “nonsense” since the vast majority were rejected, despite being legally entitled to be in New Zealand.

She said: “Overnight my life just changed and it changed so badly. I have nothing here because I have my life in New Zealand. My parents are going into depression, my mum cried saying: you should not have come. I honestly want to see Jacinda Ardern face to face. I’m that angry with her. I have not done anything wrong. She is the one who has, in the name of COVID, in the name of the election.”

Swarna explained that there were many others in similar situations. “We are not the ones who brought COVID... we are being punished. I know a boy who came to attempt suicide a few months back. He ate so many sleeping pills, he was rushed to hospital.” Swarna urged the NZ government: “Let people in who are eligible to come in. Let them start their lives! [Ardern] has just stopped our lives, she is controlling our lives for eight months.”



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