

Migrants protest in India demanding right to return to New Zealand

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Hundreds of stranded migrant workers have protested in India in recent weeks, calling on New Zealand's government of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern to allow them to return.

More than 10,000 people who normally live in NZ were stuck outside the country in March when the Labour Party-led government imposed draconian border restrictions in response to the pandemic. The *National Herald* estimated that 2,000 of work visa holders have been stuck in India for nine months. Some have been separated from family members in New Zealand. Many have lost their jobs and are in severe hardship.

On November 17, more than 50 people demonstrated in New Delhi. Rallies, organised through social media, have also been held in Sangrur, Jalandhar, Ludhiana, Mohali and Gujarat. Protest organiser Jagdeep Dhillon said they called on the New Zealand government to give all temporary visa holders visa extensions equal to the duration of the border closure, and to allow all workers normally resident in NZ to return.

Tens of thousands of NZ citizens have returned from overseas during the pandemic. On arrival, they are required to spend two weeks in a quarantine hotel.

The coalition government, which includes the Green Party and is backed by the trade unions, is discriminating against migrants in order to divert popular anger and prevent a unified struggle by workers from all backgrounds against soaring unemployment, austerity and social inequality. Within New Zealand, thousands of migrants on temporary visas who have lost their jobs are barred from accessing unemployment benefits. Tens of thousands who have applied for residency are facing endless delays and fear that they may be forced to leave the country.

In response to the Indian protests, NZ immigration

minister Kris Faafoi told *Radio Tarana* the government was “allowing entry to some normally resident temporary visa holders who can demonstrate a longstanding connection to New Zealand and have a job or business to return to.” Such statements are thoroughly misleading. Only a small handful have been allowed to return.

Urvi, who attended the New Delhi protest, told the *World Socialist Web Site* she had studied and worked in New Zealand since 2017. She was visiting her grandmother, who was unwell, when the border closed. “My return flight was booked for March 23 and on the 19th they just shut the borders and no time was given to re-book a flight and come back,” she said.

Urvi applied to Immigration NZ (INZ) for an exemption to return on humanitarian grounds, but was turned down. “They won’t tell us what is humanitarian, according to them. People’s lives are at stake but that is not considered humanitarian,” she said. Unable to return, Urvi lost her job in New Zealand with a bank.

Urvi said she had been impressed by media coverage glorifying Ardern’s response to the far-right terrorist attack in Christchurch in March 2019, but she now criticised the portrayal of New Zealand as “the most compassionate government in the world.”

“I’ve written to so many MPs and ministers,” Urvi said. “The government doesn’t even acknowledge our emails. They are not ignoring one or two people, they are ignoring thousands of people writing to them.” The New Zealand High Commission had refused to send anyone to meet with New Delhi protesters to receive their list of demands, she said.

Swarna had visited India to give blood to her mother, who was gravely ill, just before the NZ border shut. She has spoken with several other people who had travelled for medical reasons. “There’s a girl who

came to India for three weeks' holiday to have eye surgery because she can't afford it in New Zealand. One guy I know had an accident in Christchurch and he came to India to rest because there was no one to take care of him in New Zealand."

She said Ardern was using COVID-19 as a pretext "to throw the migrants away," with many being plunged into poverty. "We are thinking about each penny because we haven't earned anything for nine months. It is winter in India and one migrant was saying to me they don't have enough winter clothes because they left them in New Zealand. When we travelled to India in March it was going to be summer."

Zee, her husband and their seven-year-old daughter, have been living out of suitcases for nine months after travelling to Bangalore for what was meant to be a four-week visit to see her mother. The family had lived in Christchurch since 2018 and she is employed as an administrator for the Canterbury District Health Board. Zee told the WSWs, "My manager extended my unpaid leave up to January, and if I do not get back in January I will lose my job."

Despite having no income, Zee and her husband were making repayments on a student loan and paying rent for their Christchurch house. "Whatever meagre savings we had are almost exhausted. Perhaps we will have to use our credit cards to pay our further rent as that is the only option we have," she said.

"We are staying in my husband's sister's house and I don't know what to do next. We don't know what's going to happen tomorrow. Everything is in New Zealand, we don't have anything in India. It's been months that I have not had a peaceful sleep. My daughter is really distressed. She misses her teachers, her school, her friends. I have tried multiple times to apply for an exemption [to return] and I got rejected despite working for the health sector."

Zee noted that the NZ border was never truly closed and double standards are being applied. "There are cricketers who are coming in and getting tested positive [for COVID-19], there are rugby players, nannies of actresses are being allowed, they are considered as critical workers. What are we then? Why can't we come back?"

"It's not the general public who do not want us back," she said. "All our Kiwi friends are very kind, they keep vouching for us, saying that we have the right

to come back. It's just the government that is playing with our lives."

Zee was scathing about the media's praise for Ardern's supposed kindness. "My husband was just showing me that she is nominated for *Time* magazine's Person of the Year. This is just a hoax," she said. During the October election campaign, and in the weeks since then, Ardern has not spoken about the plight of migrants stranded overseas.



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