

New Zealand government bans foreign cruise ship workers

Tom Peters
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On January 29, New Zealand's immigration minister Kris Faafoi announced that the approaching cruise ship *Le Lapérouse* had stopped just outside the country's exclusive economic zone and was being advised to "turn around," after officials denied work visas to 61 of its 90 crew members.

Faafoi said the ship, which was not carrying passengers, could dock in New Zealand for maintenance, but the 61 workers, including waiters, chefs, bartenders, entertainers and housekeeping staff, would have to leave the country immediately or be "detained until they are able to leave." The "best course of action," he said, would be for the ship to "turn around before they get here."

Stuff reported that staff from the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment had "told the ship's owners to dump the hospitality crew in New Caledonia, before proceeding onto New Zealand."

The owners, French firm Ponant, decided to turn *Le Lapérouse* around and anchor off the coast of Noumea, in the French Pacific island territory of New Caledonia. With a cyclone approaching and the ship running low on fuel, potentially endangering the crew, Noumean authorities allowed the ship to dock last night.

The fate of the crew, who are from several different countries, remains highly uncertain. Given the global collapse of the tourism and cruise ship industries, they will undoubtedly struggle to find other jobs if they cannot work on *Le Lapérouse*.

The episode underscores the draconian character of the Labour Party-Greens coalition government's border regime. Under the guise of keeping the country safe during the pandemic, the government is stoking nationalism and xenophobia to divide the working class and prevent any unified struggle against austerity and job cuts.

Thousands of foreign migrant workers who have visas entitling them to live in New Zealand, are stranded overseas and have been denied the right to re-enter. Many have been separated from family members. Tens of thousands of migrants living in New Zealand are facing endless delays in the processing of their residency applications.

Faafoi told a press conference: "New Zealand takes its border security extremely seriously, especially given the threat of COVID-19," implying the cruise ship workers posed a health risk. However, the crew of *Le Lapérouse* had tested negative for the coronavirus on four occasions and were aboard the ship for 27 days to fulfill isolation criteria.

New Zealand company Wild Earth Travel had chartered the vessel to provide cruises to sub-Antarctic islands. *Le Lapérouse* had been cleared by NZ's Ministry of Health to enter New Zealand well before it departed from Indonesia on January 10. Ponant believed that this approval implied its crew would be granted visas.

Cruise ships were banned in March 2020 due to the pandemic, but the government allowed the industry to restart late last year. Numerous media articles published in December and January welcomed the return of *Le Lapérouse*, which has operated in New Zealand for seven years. The government apparently did not warn the ship's operators that two thirds of its crew would be barred from entering the country.

Faafoi admitted to Radio NZ that the crew did not pose a health risk, but said New Zealand's border closure in late March 2020 meant only citizens, residents and workers granted an exemption to fill "critical skills shortages" could enter the country. Immigration NZ informed *Le Lapérouse* that 61 crew did not meet the criteria only days before it was due to

arrive.

Far from defending the crew of Le Lapérouse, who have been prevented from earning a living solely because of their nationality, New Zealand's trade union bureaucracy applauded the government's ban.

Maritime Union (MUNZ) assistant secretary Craig Harrison said the cruise ship jobs should have been reserved for "young New Zealanders... struggling to get positions." He said "workers that have been displaced at Air New Zealand," the national airline, could have been employed on Le Lapérouse. He urged the ship operator to enlist the union to act essentially as a recruitment agency and find local staff to replace the 61 foreign crew.

The Merchant Service Guild (MSG) suggested that the entire crew of Le Lapérouse, including the 29 technical crew who were granted visas, should be replaced by New Zealanders. MSG vice-president Ian McLeod told Radio NZ the ship's "non-resident crew can stay onboard for a couple of weeks to train New Zealanders," and then return home. All ships should be "using New Zealand people with New Zealand crews," he said.

Migrant workers are not responsible for unemployment, which has soared in New Zealand as in every country, amid the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. Official figures show 4.9 percent of working age people in NZ are unemployed, up from 4 percent a year ago. The "underutilisation rate," including part-time workers who want more hours and people not actively looking for work, is much higher at 11.9 percent.

The unions are scapegoating foreigners for the lack of decent jobs to divert attention from the fact that they have enforced mass sackings, wage cuts and other attacks on the working class. These organisations do not represent workers. They are a privileged middle class bureaucracy working hand-in-hand with big business and the state to defend the interests of New Zealand capitalism.

The E t? union, for example, refused to organise any resistance in the working class to more than 4,000 job cuts by Air New Zealand, which is majority-owned by the government and received a loan of \$900 million from the state to keep it afloat.

While issuing occasional pleas to minimise redundancies, E t? called on the airline to cut its foreign

workforce to reduce costs. On September 16, 2020, the union stated that "there is no operational reason for Air New Zealand to retain a crew base in Shanghai" and demanded that the airline end its agreement with a crew hire company in the Chinese city.

E t? and MUNZ are both affiliated to the Labour Party and urged workers to re-elect it in the last year's election, despite Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's government handing out tens of billions of dollars to major corporations, while overseeing soaring social inequality, homelessness and poverty. MUNZ donated more than \$40,000 of union members' money to Labour's election campaign.

The Socialist Equality Group (NZ) calls on the working class to reject the nationalist and xenophobic poison promoted by Labour and the unions, and to defend the crew of La Lapérouse. These workers must be allowed to work and live in New Zealand with the same rights as citizens.



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