

Thousands protest against New Zealand government's anti-immigrant policies

Tom Peters
13 May 2021

Hundreds of migrant workers and supporters rallied outside New Zealand's parliament in Wellington yesterday to protest the Labour Party-Greens coalition government's anti-immigrant policies.

The day before, hundreds attended protest vigils in Auckland, Christchurch and Hamilton. About 60 demonstrators also gathered in Queenstown, a tourism centre where many migrants lost their jobs last year due to the COVID-19 border closure and the economic collapse. Thousands of migrants were unable to access unemployment benefits.

The events expressed mounting anger among immigrants, who make up a large portion of the population—about one in four people in NZ was born overseas. Thousands of migrant workers and international students, whose visas entitle them to live in New Zealand, have been stranded for more than a year outside the country. Many have been separated from their families, jobs and homes in New Zealand. Meanwhile, thousands who live in New Zealand are facing interminable delays after applying for residency.

Like governments internationally, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's government is responding to the social crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic by seeking to scapegoat immigrants and stoke nationalism.

In a blatantly discriminatory action, the government temporarily banned all travel from India from April 11 to April 28. The Australian government recently took similar action. No such ban was ever implemented for travel from the US, UK or other countries where COVID-19 has been rampant.

The NZ rallies were organised by the Federation of Aotearoa Migrants (FAM), a recently formed umbrella group. It includes Migrants NZ, which began as a Facebook group for migrants to share their stories; the Migrant Workers Association, which is linked to the

trade unions; the Migrant Rights Network NZ; and the Association of New Kiwis Aotearoa.

FAM called for migrants already in NZ to be given residency, an end to visa processing delays, and for migrants stuck overseas to be allowed back. It is also demanding an end to work visas being linked to specific employers—a rule that gives companies power to exploit migrant workers and threaten them with deportation if they complain.

Immigration Minister Kris Faafoi addressed the crowd outside parliament. He feigned sympathy for migrants while declaring that “these are extraordinary times” and the “border controls and managed isolation regime” were essential to keep people safe. He gave no explanation for the extraordinary backlog of unprocessed visa applications.

Faafoi said, “Others will say: open the borders to everyone who has family here and wants to be reunited, but it is not that simple... I can't, today, bring you the news that you want to hear.” The minister ended his brief speech amid shouts of “Shame,” “Not good enough!” and “Bring them back!”

The government has repurposed several hotels into managed isolation and quarantine (MIQ) facilities, where citizens and residents must spend two weeks after returning from overseas. These hotels are often understaffed, and poor management has led to leaks of COVID-19 cases into the community. The government has refused to set up properly run facilities to accommodate more returnees, including migrants.

At the Wellington rally, migrants from China, India, Sri Lanka, the UK and South Africa, spoke about their experiences with Immigration New Zealand (INZ) and the traumatic effects on their families.

Alan John Koshy, a journalist from Kerala, India, who moved to New Zealand in 2017, denounced INZ's

practices as “short-sighted, greedy and xenophobic.” He applied for residency under the Skilled Migrant Category in January 2020, hoping that his family would soon be able to join him in New Zealand, but they have been “stuck in limbo” ever since. The Ardern government’s policies have “created a migrant population that’s left with few rights and at risk of exploitation, with no benefits to fall back on,” he said.

Jonathan, an electrical maintenance worker, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that his partner, from the Philippines, is barred from entering New Zealand to process her visa application, unless he goes back to the Philippines, at great expense, and then returns with her. “If she was from a Western country, it wouldn’t be a problem at all. I can be here, continue my work and do the application,” he said, but there are different rules for “Third World” countries.

He described the situation as “modern-day racism. Here’s a Labour Party talking about being inclusive and a ‘team of five million,’ but it’s not.” He said he was “shocked at how New Zealand has changed” in terms of its immigration policies.

Jennifer (not her real name) told the WSWs she and her husband moved to New Zealand from China more than six years ago and have been waiting more than a year after applying for residency. They have a young son who “loves New Zealand very much” and has spent most of his life in NZ. She said Immigration NZ had given “no reason” for the extreme delay.

Despite being highly qualified and employed in an area with a skills shortage, Jennifer said, “my salary doesn’t meet the ‘high priority’ requirements” for Immigration NZ to fast-track her application. To qualify as “high priority,” an applicant needs to earn over \$100,000. “It’s not fair to set the priority rule based on the salary,” she said.

As well as Faafoi, MPs from the right-wing opposition National and ACT Parties briefly addressed the rally, falsely claiming to support immigrants. The previous National-ACT government presided over widespread exploitation of migrant workers, anti-refugee policies, and frequent deportations—which has all continued under the present government.

Green Party MP Ricardo Menendez-March also spoke, declaring that the Greens would “keep working constructively with our colleagues [in Labour] to ensure that your calls are heard.” The Greens have been

part of the Labour-led government for nearly four years. From 2017 to 2020 the coalition government included the right-wing NZ First Party, which has repeatedly made racist statements against Chinese people, Indians and Muslims. The Labour-Greens government has essentially adopted NZ First’s anti-immigrant policies.

The Migrant Workers Association (MWA), one of the protest organisers, has worked with the Greens and Unite union to organise a petition calling on the government to address FAM’s demands. Unite leader Mike Treen supported Labour and the Greens in the 2017 and 2020 elections and the union seeks to persuade migrants that this right-wing, anti-immigrant government can be pressured to defend their rights.

MWA spokesperson Anu Kaloti told the migrants gathered in Wellington that “unions will always stand up for your rights.” In fact, unions have repeatedly agitated against foreign workers. In February, the Maritime Union opposed foreign cruise ship workers coming to NZ, saying the jobs should be reserved for “New Zealanders.” E t? responded to mass redundancies at Air New Zealand last year by calling for the airline to slash its overseas-based workforce to cut costs. In 2018, Unite applauded a government decision to temporarily ban migrants from working at fast food chain Burger King—an extraordinary attack on dozens of workers.

The aim of these nationalist organisations is to subordinate the movement of migrant workers to the very government that is responsible for the escalating attacks on their rights.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact