

New Zealand PM announces fraudulent apology for 1970s immigration raids

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New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced last week that her Labour-led government will make an official apology for the infamous “dawn raids” that targeted the country’s Pacific Island immigrants during the 1970s.

In April, leaders of the Pasifika community, including former members of the now defunct Polynesian Panthers, called for an official apology, describing the dawn raids as “government-sanctioned racism.” The formal ceremony will be conducted with a cultural event in Auckland on June 26.

The dawn raids, designated by police at the time as “Operation Pot Black,” were politically orchestrated. They were initiated in 1973 by the third Labour government, and continued under the National administration led by Robert Muldoon.

The victims were mainly working-class Samoan, Tongan and Fijian immigrants, who were targeted and accused of overstaying their visas. So-called “overstayers” and their families were prosecuted and summarily deported. Pacific Islanders only made up one-third of “illegal” migrants but accounted for 86 percent of those prosecuted.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the government had encouraged immigration from the Pacific to fill workforce shortages, particularly in laboring, manufacturing and the service industries. The Pacific Island population in New Zealand grew to 45,000 by 1971. However, when the economic downturn sharpened in 1973–74, immigrant workers and their families were singled out for persecution.

While the raids had a definite racist character, they signalled the beginning of a broad offensive against the working class. As the post-war boom subsided internationally, the ruling elites, with the crucial assistance of the Stalinist, social-democratic and trade union organisations, moved to rein in the revolutionary upsurge of the working class that began in the late 1960s. The deepening economic crisis saw US President Richard Nixon end the Bretton Woods agreement in 1971, that had been the foundation of the post-war order.

Highly vulnerable New Zealand capitalism lurched into a particularly sharp crisis. The economy was hit by a decline

in international wool prices in 1966. Britain joined the European Economic Community in 1973, depriving NZ of its major market for dairy products, and the 1973 oil crisis saw widespread petrol rationing.

The Kirk Labour government was installed to suppress and break up struggles by the working class to defend living standards. A series of acts and regulations was issued to hold down wages. In 1974, a Stalinist trade union official, Bill Andersen, was jailed for ignoring a court injunction in an industrial dispute. Over 10,000 workers marched through Auckland demanding his release.

The moves against immigrant workers were part of this class assault. Officials, and a specialised police task force, raided homes, churches, schools and workplaces, carrying out a reign of terror in Pacific communities. Armed police and dog squads burst into the homes of terrified families in the early hours of the morning, inflicting verbal and physical mistreatment. Random checks were conducted in the streets, with people racially profiled and forced to produce their passports and other documentation to verify their status.

There was broad popular opposition to the raids, particularly in the working class. Among youth, the Polynesian Panthers, founded in 1971, raised a militant black nationalist agenda, modelled on the US Black Panther Party’s community program, including rent strikes and vague calls for “social revolution.” With the dawn raids generating immense hostility in countries across the Pacific, Muldoon officially abandoned them in 1979.

Announcing the apology, Ardern said: “The dawn raids were a defining moment in New Zealand’s history, and the emotional harm caused by them remains etched in the living memory of those who were directly impacted. Communities at the time felt targeted and terrorized, and there is clear evidence the raids were discriminatory and have had a lasting negative impact. An apology can never reverse what happened, or undo the damage caused, but we can acknowledge it and we can seek to right a wrong.”

The Minister for Pacific Peoples, Aupito William Sio, said the apology would promote a “reconciliation process” for

those directly impacted. “I don’t think there is any Pacific family not affected by the dawn raids,” he said.

Ordinary people will no doubt welcome the apology as a necessary step in acknowledging the crimes committed against Pacific communities. A quarter of New Zealand’s population is now made up of people born overseas, including from Asia, while Auckland is the largest Polynesian city in the southwest Pacific.

However, the government’s apology, which is supported by all the parliamentary parties, is a cynical ploy. Ardern is again using the veneer of “kindness” and “compassion,” cultivated in particular following the 2019 Christchurch terror attack, to divert attention from an intensifying assault against immigrants and the wider working class.

The apology for past crimes is being used as a cover for those being carried out in the present. Like governments internationally, Labour is responding to the social crisis, intensified by the pandemic, by scapegoating immigrants and stoking nationalism. This is provoking growing opposition.

A version of the dawn raids is even now being used by Immigration New Zealand. The department confirmed to *Stuff* last week that between May 2020 and 2021, a total of 223 raids were conducted at private addresses—19 of which were between the hours of 6am and 7am.

There are many examples of brutal treatment by immigration authorities. Earlier this year, a Philippines couple and their seven-year-old son were deported, as punishment for claiming food vouchers to which they were not entitled, during the 2020 COVID lockdown. In March, officials arrested and imprisoned 10 Chinese construction workers in Auckland, then deported them for allegedly breaching migration rules.

Migrants have repeatedly protested over their dire situation. Many have relatives who have been stranded for more than a year outside the country, separated from their families, jobs and homes. Thousands, including many designated as skilled workers, are facing delays of two years or longer, after applying for residency. Those who are turning eighteen face losing their current status and becoming non-persons in the complex immigration system.

The restrictions are in line with Labour’s 2017 immigration policy, carried through with its then-coalition partner, the right-wing anti-immigrant NZ First Party. The policy called for migration—at that time around 70,000 a year—to be slashed by up to 30,000. Those targeted, in the first instance, were international students and “low skilled” workers. Labour has simultaneously kept New Zealand’s annual refugee intake at just 1,500, one of the lowest in the world.

Some responses to Ardern’s announcement have been

scathing. A member of the Facebook group “NZ Citizens and PR’s Separated from Partners by NZ Border Closure” wrote: “This woman apologizes for wrongs committed 50 years ago whilst presiding over one of the most racist, dysfunctional and human rights breaching immigration departments in history. ... I honestly can’t believe the hypocrisy. It’s blowing my mind.”

The Federation of Aotearoa Migrants is currently planning another protest for the same day as the apology ceremony in Auckland.

The apology is bound up with the Labour government’s efforts to use racial identity politics to divert attention from the growing chasm between the rich and working people of all backgrounds. The Labour caucus has been hailed internationally for its “diversity,” including 10 Pacific and 15 Maori MPs, the biggest numbers ever. Kris Faafoi, of Tokelauan descent, is the Minister for Immigration.

While the ruling elite has created opportunities for a narrow layer of entrepreneurs, middle class professionals, academics, and state bureaucrats from Maori and Pacific backgrounds, the majority of Pacific people remain among the most oppressed sections of the working class. They suffer low wages, along with poor housing and health.

Resistance is emerging within the broader working class to the Labour government’s austerity agenda. Some 30,000 nurses and healthcare workers, including many Pacific and Asian workers, held a nationwide strike on June 9, against a pay rise offer of just 1.38 percent. Health Minister Andrew Little was booed off the stage when he attempted to justify the government’s policies to protesters outside parliament.



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