

New Zealand government axes emergency benefit payments to migrants

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In another attack on the basic rights of migrants, the New Zealand Labour government of Jacinda Ardern has axed “emergency” benefits, paid to unemployed migrants. The move took place with the country in the middle of a nationwide lockdown over a surge of COVID-19 cases.

Like governments internationally, the Labour Party-led coalition, which includes the Green Party and is backed by the trade unions, is actively discriminating against migrants, in order to divert popular anger over worsening poverty and the spiralling cost of living.

When the economic crisis, triggered by the pandemic, erupted last year and borders were closed, thousands of migrant workers lost their jobs. Ineligible for unemployment benefits, they were forced to rely on food parcels and emergency support provided through the Red Cross.

The Ministry of Social Development (MSD) finally began paying welfare benefits to migrants last December, at the same rate as the standard poverty-level unemployment benefit: \$251 a week for a single person and \$375 a week for a sole parent.

However, temporary visa holders were denied any extra payments available to residents, including the accommodation supplement, which hundreds of thousands of residents rely upon to pay for out-of-control rental costs.

According to the MSD’s Work and Income website, the emergency benefit payment ended on August 31. The Ministry told Radio NZ that final payments were being made in the week beginning September 6.

The website says people still needing support should contact their embassy. It also directs migrants to the Immigration New Zealand Repatriation Fund, for “help with paying for travel to return to your home country.”

Among the affected temporary visa holders are an

estimated 25,000 international students, who are limited to working 20 hours a week. In addition to axing emergency benefits, the government has also refused to renew a \$1 million International Student Hardship Fund, which was established last year.

The fund provided grants to education providers and other organisations, to enable them to “direct financial relief or other support, including food parcels and support towards living costs.” International students were eligible for a maximum of \$1000 in cash or kind, from the fund.

The International Students Association (NZISA) president Afiqah Ramizi told Radio NZ on August 31: “We pay extensive international student fees, support local economies, and contribute to the New Zealand job market. At the same time we are cut off from our families who are also struggling abroad.”

On August 25, Social Development Minister Carmel Sepuloni, bluntly told a parliamentary select committee that the government was “not considering extending” the emergency payments for migrant workers.

Sepuloni claimed that there were “between 60 and 80 people” receiving the payment. She told *Stuff* on September 1: “Ending welfare support for temporary visa holders reflects overall improvements in international travel and economic conditions that have enabled most [of them] to return home or support themselves in New Zealand by finding work.”

In fact, this relatively low number of recipients reflects the fact that migrants have been discouraged from applying, rather than a lack of need. *Stuff* reported: “When the scheme was set up, it was estimated it would support 5,800 people,” based on the level of need among jobless migrants. But from December 2020 to February 2021, only 306 migrants received the benefit.

Stuff journalist Dileepa Fonseka wrote on July 10 that early in the pandemic “several migrants I spoke to were struggling to survive, but also not particularly keen to talk, for fear of being found out. Going hungry or living on the street for a few weeks is not too high a price to pay if it means Immigration New Zealand won’t find out you no longer have that job your visa is attached to.”

The Green Party has postured as a supporter of migrant workers, with MP Ricardo Menéndez March writing on Facebook: “It’s callous for the Government to be cutting income support” in the middle of the lockdown. He pointed out that the low uptake was due to “strict criteria requiring migrants to prove they were leaving.”

The Green Party, however, has been part of the Ardern government since 2017, when it joined a coalition with Labour and the right-wing nationalist NZ First Party. The Greens’ role is to promote the illusion that the government can be pressured to move to the left—even as it ramps up the attack on immigrants and imposes austerity across the public sector, while handing out billions of dollars in subsidies and tax breaks to big business.

The ending of benefits for temporary visa holders is the latest in a series of anti-immigrant measures, carried out since the 2017 election, when Labour and NZ First adopted a policy to slash migration—then around 70,000 a year—by up to 30,000.

New rules introduced in 2019 blocked thousands of less wealthy parents from joining their adult children. A resident or citizen must now earn over \$106,000 a year to bring one parent, or \$159,000—more than three times the median salary—to bring two.

The pandemic has been used to bring immigration to a virtual halt, with a net migration gain of just 6,600 people last year. Labour suspended the processing of residency visas under the Skilled Migrant Category (SMC) in March 2020, blaming the impacts of COVID-19, leaving more than 30,000 applicants in limbo.

The *Indian Weekender* reported on July 30 that around 60,000 Indian migrants with temporary work or student visas faced “uncertainty and despair,” as the government “continues to throttle the pathway to residency.” A decision to lapse 50,000 temporary visa applications, filed offshore after August 2020, and bar

visa holders from re-entering the country, prompted protests in India and fuelled fear among current residents. Some partners and children, trapped overseas, have not seen their family members for more than 500 days, due to NZ’s border restrictions.

In May, Economic Development Minister Stuart Nash said that the pandemic was a “once-in-a-generation” chance to “reset” immigration policy. He bluntly declared that the government aimed to make it harder for employers to take on workers from overseas. Meanwhile, new border exceptions allow more than 200 wealthy international investors to enter the country over the next 12 months. Larry Page, co-founder of Google and the world’s sixth richest person, reputedly worth \$166 billion, was recently granted residency, on the basis that he invests \$NZ10 million over three years.

New Zealand’s brutal, class-based immigration policies demolish the media propaganda that Ardern’s government is based on “kindness” and “compassion.” It is a right-wing government, intent on whipping up nationalism and xenophobia in order to prevent a unified struggle by workers from all backgrounds against austerity and social inequality.



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