

# New Zealand Labour-led government continues attacks on immigrants

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28 November 2021

The immigration minister in New Zealand's Labour-led government, Kris Faafoi, announced in September that migrants living in NZ on temporary work visas would be "fast-tracked" for residency. Trumpeted as a major breakthrough, the decision provides for a one-off residency "pathway" for an estimated 165,000 migrants.

Applications for the new residency process will be opened up between December and July. "Critical workers" who cross the border before the end of July next year will also be eligible. Faafoi said family members who meet certain criteria will be able to join migrants already in NZ.

The Labour-Green Party government has come under mounting pressure over its stalled, chaotic and inhumane immigration system. The COVID-19 pandemic was 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 in March 2020, blaming the impact of COVID-19, leaving more than 30,000 applicants in limbo.

Millions of immigrants and refugees around the globe are being subjected to vicious anti-democratic measures. Like governments internationally, New Zealand's ruling coalition, which is backed by the trade unions and pseudo-left groups, is actively discriminating against migrants, in order to divert popular anger over worsening poverty and the spiralling cost of living.

The *Indian Weekender* reported in July that around 60,000 Indian migrants with temporary work or student visas faced "uncertainty and despair," as the government continued 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. Many partners and children, trapped overseas, have still not seen their family members for nearly two years due to NZ's border

restrictions.

The announcement of the new policy was understandably met with considerable relief and jubilation among the immigrant community. Hundreds of migrants and supporters participated in a series of protests and a petitioning campaign organised by the Migrant Workers Association, and pseudo-left Unite Union, since last year.

Claiming credit, the Unite Union declared the "pathway" decision was a "win for all working people." Unite praised the NZ Council of Trade Unions, along with some employers and the Green Party which came "fully on board" the campaign. The "victory" was attributed to the protests which the union said it led "from the beginning" and which were "getting bigger and bigger as the year went on."

In fact, Labour's shift had nothing to do with the protests, which were oriented towards petitioning the government and to which it, in turn, paid little attention. Rather, it dovetailed with the government's preparations to "transition" from its perspective of eliminating COVID-19 to one of "opening up" the borders and the economy, in line with the increasingly strident demands of big business and announced by Prime Minister Ardern on October 4.

Business NZ chief executive Kirk Hope declared the immigration reset would provide "welcome relief" to employers who had been trying to retain workers to remain "globally competitive." With major skill shortages across a number of industries and regions, and ongoing pressures at the border, "New Zealand cannot afford to lose any more skilled people from the workforce if we want to maintain economic momentum and bounce back from the latest Auckland lockdown," he said.

The policy remains highly restrictive, offering an opening only to those migrants deemed a benefit to the economy. According to *Stuff*, applicants must meet one of six criteria: "have lived in New Zealand for three or more

years, earn above the median wage (\$NZ27 per hour or more), work in a role on the long-term skill shortage list, hold occupational registration and work in health or education, work in personal care or other critical health worker roles, or have jobs within the primary industries.”

Faafoi said that initially 5,000 health and aged care workers, 9,000 primary industry workers, and 800 teachers would be eligible. A “portion” of the 15,000 construction and 12,000 manufacturing workers on temporary visas could be eligible. Some 910 people meanwhile signed a petition to parliament protesting against the exclusion of international PhD students from being able to apply.

Such selective measures are in line with Labour’s long-standing anti-immigrant stance. The Labour Party’s platform for the 2017 election, carried through with its then-coalition partner, the right-wing anti-immigrant NZ First Party, was to cut net migration—at that time around 70,000 a year—by up to 30,000 by winding back on international students and “low skilled” workers.

In a major policy speech in May, Economic Development Minister Stuart Nash said the government intended to make it harder for employers to take on workers from overseas, other than in areas of “genuine skills shortages.” Wealthy investors were targeted while entry for those classed as “low-skill” and low-wage workers closed off. Labour has also kept the annual refugee intake at just 1,500, one of the lowest in the world.

Endorsing the ongoing clamp-down, the Productivity Commission reported this month that pre-pandemic rates of immigration were “unsustainable” in the face of an “inability or unwillingness” to build the infrastructure to support would-be migrants. Higher levels of immigration without the necessary support had added to “burdens for the wider community,” the commission declared.

Cruel attacks on the conditions of migrants continue. Since September’s announcement, the rights of tens of thousands of immigrants, would-be immigrants, family members, foreign students and visa holders stuck offshore have continued to be systematically abridged, with devastating results.

Green Party MP Ricardo Menendez March recently admitted that thousands of migrants are still excluded under the policy because they are on an ineligible visa, they are not paid enough to qualify as “essential work,” are stuck offshore, or don’t meet the “settled” criteria. “It is a shame that we have to fight for a review of something that we were initially very excited about,” March told the

*Indian Weekender.*

Labour’s stance has provided the opportunity not only for the Greens—who are part of the government—but the right-wing opposition parties, National and ACT, to falsely pose as supporters of immigrants, asserting that their conditions can be addressed by pleas to parliament. Indicating the illusions being promoted, one post to the Facebook group ‘NZ Work Visa Holders Stuck Overseas’ declared: “Support friendly MPs... Left for Green, Centric for National, & Right for ACT. Make them raise more & more voices against the Labour party that has made our life hard & difficult.”

However, anti-immigrant laws and harsh bureaucratic measures have been imposed by successive governments of every stripe. Labour’s record demonstrates that it has zero concern for the rights of migrant workers. But the same goes for the entire ruling elite, which pursued a racist “White New Zealand” policy for much of the past century, with the support of the unions. The major parties still routinely demonise immigrants for everything from low wages to job losses and the housing crisis.

Appeals to the political establishment through petitions and “pressure” politics is a dead end. The conception that access to immigration depends on the needs of the economy must be totally opposed. All working people have the right to live and work wherever they want, with full citizenship rights. Advancing this perspective requires a political fight against the entire political establishment by turning to the broad working class on the program of international socialism.



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