

Vanuatu inquiry into Australia's exploitative seasonal worker scheme

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The government of Vanuatu, in the southwest Pacific, has launched an inquiry into the country's seasonal worker program with Australia, citing concerns about rampant exploitation.

The *Guardian* reported on February 23 that the inquiry follows testimony from Vanuatuan workers to a parliamentary hearing in Australia, in which they recounted experiences of bullying, exploitative working conditions, poor accommodation and lack of support services.

One worker, Sergio, told the hearing that he had received just \$100 a week, from which \$30 a week was deducted with no explanation about what the deductions were for. Sergio had worked picking grapes in Mildura, Victoria, since 2019. He was paid by piece rate at \$2.50 a box and could fill up to 110 boxes in a day. However, he received payments of just \$70 into his bank account.

Sergio further testified that when workers were ill, "medics" would come and force them to go to work. "I [did] not come here [to be] a slave. You should give me a better life, and that's why I fight for my peoples," he told the inquiry. At one point he had organised a week-long strike among his friends.

Last November, the Australian government launched an aggressive campaign to prevent Pacific workers from fleeing their jobs after more than 1,000 reportedly absconded. The campaign warned they would "bring shame to their families" and risked having their visa cancelled. Sydney lawyer Stewart Levitt has begun preparing a class action against the federal government, detailing "substandard and inhumane conditions" rife in the program.

Vanuatu's opposition leader, Ralph Regenvanu, tweeted he had "urged our government to seek to revise the agreements between the Vanuatu and Australian governments" concerning the scheme. "Vanuatu Government has its duty to safeguard its citizens," he

declared. Regenvanu, however, was responsible for introducing the policy as foreign minister in 2011.

The Pacific Island governments, who are partners in the programs, will do nothing to materially improve the conditions of the workers. They have all signed up to the agreements and are closely involved in vetting applicants and even helping supervise their behaviour. The schemes have been lauded by all the participating authorities for the purported economic "benefits" to fragile island economies which depend heavily on remittances paid by expatriates and overseas workers.

Despite repeated complaints and media exposures over the years, nothing has changed. Researcher Tupai Fotuosamoa Jackson also told the *Guardian* that participants in the Vanuatu inquiry could be afraid to speak openly for fear of losing their job. "For the worker, there is an obligation to remain on the program and there is a fear that your opportunity to continue will be impacted," he said.

Australia's Seasonal Worker Program (SWP) and Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS) recruit workers into jobs in rural and regional Australia, particularly for the agricultural sector. More than 20,000 workers have entered the program since it was started by the Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, supported by the unions, in 2008. It was opened up to residents from the impoverished nations of Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. Before COVID-19 hit, numbers were increasing every year.

New Zealand also operates a Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme which began in 2007, preceding the Australian schemes. It allows the horticulture and viticulture industries to import workers on temporary work visas from Samoa, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji.

There are currently roughly 4,500 Vanuatuan workers in

Australia, according to the Vanuatu's government. Since it commenced the overall program has filled a total of more than 50,000 seasonal jobs. New Zealand's RSE scheme has grown from 5,000 workers a year to more than 14,000. There are currently 7,300 RSE workers in New Zealand, but the supply of workers has been disrupted by COVID-19 border controls.

A *Guardian* investigation in October 2020 into the Australian scheme cited reports of alleged abuse and intimidation and workers surviving by eating the food they were picking. Others were charged more than \$1,000 a week to sleep on a couch. Some workers have taken legal action over their treatment. Others have died, underscoring the deprivation of basic food, shelter and medical care.

A 2016 joint Australian parliamentary committee inquiry heard that exploitation was "common." According to Union Aid Abroad, complaints included the provision of substandard accommodation, deductions of up to 60 percent of wages for lodging and board, long hours and excessive or unpaid overtime, and lack of access to health care. The NGO declared some conditions amounted to "modern slavery."

There have been similar reports of employers abusing the scheme in New Zealand. A *Newsroom* investigation in 2020 alleged that in the Hawkes Bay, a horticulture region with the largest share of RSE workers, authorities were "turning a blind eye to migrant exploitation to keep the quota of RSE workers flowing into their region."

The report identified an under-reporting of exploitation, the tolerance of 'prison-like' accommodation, and an environment where workers earn barely above the minimum wage and are often treated like indentured labourers. There was no way for RSE workers to complain about their treatment to anyone independent of their employer. Workers who did complain were threatened with return plane trips and allowances withheld, or even blacklisting, which would see them permanently banned.

Australia and New Zealand occupy a position of neo-colonial domination over the region. The importation of Pacific people as a source of cheap labour, exploiting desperately impoverished and oppressed Pacific peoples for their own economic ends, is a practice with a long and brutal history.

Currently in both countries industry employers are among the loudest demanding the removal of all COVID-19 restrictions to prevent ongoing disruptions to their operations and flow of profits. This is despite the

huge increase in infections as the Omicron variant continues to spread, including across the Pacific.

Last September Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne announced an additional 12,500 workers would be brought in by March, with 27,000 already in the "work-ready pool." Additional "flexibilities," such as removing the upper age limit of 45 years, will also be enacted. In New Zealand, following strident calls by "stakeholders" that over 14,000 workers are required for the peak harvest season in March, temporary workers are among the first to be given entry under the Labour government's border re-opening program.

Australia's scheme is a contemporary version of the system of "blackbirding" whereby nearly one million workers were used as cheap indentured labour in Australia and other Pacific countries from the 1860s to the 1940s. Many Pacific Islanders were kidnapped and sold to Australian landowners who treated them as virtual slaves with no security or citizenship rights.

New Zealand governments also have a long and tainted history of imposing discriminatory and draconian labour and immigration controls over Pacific Islanders. When severe labour shortages developed in the early 1960s, thousands of Pacific workers were recruited for menial and factory jobs, only to subsequently find themselves victimised by hostile and racist immigration laws.

During the 1970s, many Pacific immigrant families were torn apart when police and immigration officials forcibly seized workers and their dependents, classified as "overstayers," in a series of dawn raids, and summarily expelled them from the country. Last June, Prime Minister Ardern made a hypocritical formal apology for the raids, even as her government implements ongoing attacks on the rights of immigrants who continue to be ruthlessly exploited.



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