

Slave labour systemic in New Zealand's Pacific employment scheme

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Workers in New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme, under which Pacific Islanders are brought into the country on temporary visas to labour in its horticulture industry, are being subjected to conditions akin to “modern slavery,” the Human Rights Commission has found.

According to a report released before Christmas by the Labour government's Equal Employment Opportunities Commissioner, Saunoamaali'i Karanina Sumeo, the situation is not a case of “a few bad apples” but is deeply systemic.

“When people are being told—despite being sick—‘you get in that van, and you go to the field,’ that's forced labour. If you're living in a regime where you fear for your safety—that is a version of modern-day slavery,” Sumeo said.

“And when you want to go home because of the way you've been mistreated, but you can't go until you've earned your airfare to go home, there's no freedom there. So again it's like forced labour,” the commissioner explained.

The RSE scheme, introduced by the Helen Clark Labour government in 2007, allows for 16,000 low-paid workers annually from Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji to work in the \$NZ10 billion horticulture and viticulture industries. Following border closures over the past two years because of COVID, the Ardern government recently announced that the previous “successes” of the RSE scheme will see it expanded in 2023 into the meat and seafood processing sectors.

A similar program, begun under Australia's Rudd Labor government in 2008 and involving more than 20,000 workers, has revived comparisons with that country's infamous “blackbirding” history. Up to a million workers from Pacific countries, many kidnapped and sold to landowners, were used as cheap indentured labour from the 1860s to the 1940s.

New Zealand's RSE workers stay for up to seven months during any 11-month period. They are generally paid the so-called “Living Wage,” currently \$23.65 per hour, for a minimum of 30 hours per week. The low pay rate, marginally above the legal minimum of \$21.20, is falsely promoted by the trade unions as what workers need to survive on. It is manifestly inadequate.

Media reports into both countries' schemes, as well as a Senate inquiry in Australia and a review by the Vanuatu government, have all highlighted atrocious conditions experienced by temporary workers. Despite repeated complaints and exposures however, nothing has changed.

Sumeo's report emphasises that the entire program operates on a system of rampant exploitation. Her investigation was prompted by fresh complaints by workers to *Stuff* in August. Reporter Kirsty Johnson revealed some RSE workers were housed six to a room and charged \$150 a week to sleep in freezing and damp conditions. They fell sick repeatedly and were denied paid leave when unwell.

One worker living in a crowded motel unit became so ill that he was coughing blood, but his boss initially refused to take him to the doctor, telling him to go and buy paracetamol instead. When the worker didn't attend work he allegedly continued to have his pay docked for transportation costs.

Sumeo visited the South Island wine-growing district of Blenheim and wrote that many RSE workers “live in sub-standard, over-priced, overcrowded, damp and mouldy homes without basic amenities.” She added that some of the things she witnessed warranted criminal investigation.

Sumeo's new report outlines instances of workers being charged \$1000 per bedroom to rent accommodation where they are packed seven people per room. It includes one situation where 18 workers were packed into a large hall across nine bunk beds—each paying \$160 in rent per week.

Pacific workers' visas tie them to a specific employer

which, according to Sumeo, can result in employer “over-reach” into controlling a worker’s basic rights. In one example, a female RSE worker began a sexual relationship during her employment and was then forced to present a negative pregnancy test to the employer to avoid being fired.

The report cites numerous instances of basic human rights breaches. These include workers being banned from travelling or consuming alcohol in their own time; people not being allowed to make dinner for themselves, so being forced to pay their employer for meals; workers being warned against joining a union, and ‘debts’ taken out against salaries with no explanation of how they were incurred.

Similar breaches were found by an International Labour Organisation report in June. Sumeo said the very design of the RSE scheme creates the conditions for breaches of the right to equality and freedom, just and favourable conditions at work, an adequate standard of living, freedom of movement, privacy, culture, freedom of association and the right to health.

“It would be great if it was only just one or two locations where that was happening,” Sumeo told *Stuff*. “But we’re hearing stories from all over the place so that suggests that there are systemic gaps in the support system that we provide for RSE workers.”

Pacific governments, which depend heavily on aid from Australia and NZ, have collaborated in implementing the brutal conditions. In a visit to New Zealand in June, Samoa’s Prime Minister Fiame Naomi Mata’afa avoided laying any blame over the appalling conditions facing workers. She assured horticulture employers that her government simply wants to “raise the quality” of the RSE scheme.

The report puts forward thirteen recommendations to address the “gaps” in the system, while retaining the scheme intact. They include such measures as allowing RSE workers to switch employers, “clearer” employment contracts, better enforcement through the labour inspectorate, limiting the deductions employers can take out of workers’ wages and a process where workers can freely return home early if they want.

Even if all these measures are adopted, the RSE scheme will remain a source of permanent exploitation of low-wage workers who are brought in and out of the country for limited periods at the whim of a brutal industry and with no civil rights. The slave-like conditions are not an aberration but the labour-hire business model that the ruling elite is imposing on all sections of the working

class.

Pacific Islanders in particular have a history of being scapegoated for the housing crisis, social inequality and pressure on public services. During the early 1960s, thousands of Pacific workers were recruited for menial and factory jobs, only to find themselves later victimised by racist immigration laws, and subject to infamous “dawn raids” forcefully expelling them from the country.

Underscoring the cynical neo-colonial attitude of New Zealand’s ruling elite, including the current Labour government, to the impoverished peoples of the Pacific, heavy restrictions remain on permanent immigration.

Islanders desperate to escape economic backwardness and underdevelopment by migrating to New Zealand face a bureaucratic nightmare. In a normal year, an open ballot allows for up to 1,100 residency visas to be granted to Samoan citizens, and 650 visas for other Pacific nations. Over the next two years, the quota will be increased to 5,900 to make up for two years of no visas being granted during COVID.

The ballots are hugely oversubscribed. In 2019 there were 17,000 applications from Samoa, representing 43,000 people—nearly a quarter of the island nation’s population. Overcoming the odds in the ballot is just the start—applicants have nine months to find a job that pays enough to support them and their family. They have to speak good English and there are police and health checks that require expensive fees.

The Australian and New Zealand governments boast that their Pacific immigration policies and temporary work schemes recognise a “special relationship” with their so-called “Pacific family.” It is a complete fraud. The purpose is to ensure a supply of cheap labour while tightening the imperialist grip over their Pacific colonial “backyard.” Ever more openly, this latter aim is a key aspect of the US-led preparations for a catastrophic war with China.



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