

Widespread anger in New Zealand over anti-immigrant “dawn raids”

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New Zealand’s Labour-led government has been forced into damage control after revelations that a so-called “overstayer” from the Pacific Islands was detained in a dawn raid on his South Auckland home late last month.

The brutal anti-immigrant practice is still happening despite then Labour Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern’s official apology to the Pacific community two years ago. The racist campaign, which from 1974–76 scapegoated migrants for the lack of jobs and a deepening social crisis, saw police and immigration officials carry out a wave of early morning raids targeting alleged “overstayers.”

In the latest case, the man’s lawyer, Soane Foliaki, said police showed up at 5:00 a.m. on April 19, scaring his children and taking him into custody. The man was accused of overstaying his temporary work visa. Immigration NZ admitted the early morning raid was not a “one-off.”

Foliaki said the family was still asleep, the children—staying downstairs in their two-storey rental—were the first to hear people banging on the door and blocking potential “escape routes” their dad might take. “They were terrified ... and crying and very, very upset and scared,” he told Radio NZ.

Immigration NZ said it was “rare” for officers to show up early in the morning, and the decision was approved by the national manager of compliance. Of 623 “customers” the agency “interacted with” between July 2022 and the end of last April, 19 were contacted “outside of hours.” Of these 10 were Chinese, 4 Indian, 2 Tongan, and one each from Samoa, Malaysia and Indonesia.

Immigration NZ claimed the “vast majority” of its visits were carried out between 7am and 9pm. However the department previously admitted to *Stuff* that

between May 2020 and May 2021 a total of 223 raids were conducted at private addresses—19 of which were between the hours of 6am and 7am.

Tongan church leader Pakilau Manase Lua told Radio NZ the Pacific community was “up in arms” about the case. “This is a complete betrayal of our community, it needs to stop,” he said, adding: “Being woken up in the early morning by police, treating the father like he was a drug dealer or a common criminal? You know, this guy didn’t do anything wrong apart from not completing a form to extend his stay. That’s basically it.”

Pakilau denounced the Labour government’s fraudulent apology, as “lip service.” “What was that apology all about? ... it was all for show,” he said.

Prime Minister Chris Hipkins was quickly forced to announce he did “not expect” the widely despised practice to be happening. “That does concern me. Those aren’t the sorts of tactics that I would expect us to be using in New Zealand,” he declared.

Immigration Minister Michael Wood announced he had written to the chief executive “setting out the government’s expectation that these sorts of deportations should only occur in extremis—in circumstances that absolutely require it... We want Immigration NZ to take into account fully the government’s apology for the dawn raids and to reflect that in their operational policy,” he said.

Wood notably did not instruct his department to stop the practice altogether, telling reporters any authorisation of an “out-of-hours operation” should be a “very, very rare event that has a high level of justification.”

In order to hose down continuing widespread anger among working class South Aucklanders, Wood, six Pacific MPs and community leaders then fronted what

Radio NZ described as a packed and “highly emotional” community meeting in the suburb of Otara on May 6.

Labour’s former Pacific Minister Aupito William Sio called on Pasifika leaders not to “disrespect and disregard” the historic apology. But Pakilau told him that was not good enough. “The apology was for me, my father who’s passed away, all of the overstayers that were passed away for the dawn raid. How dare you come and tell me off on my marae [meeting place],” he told the gathering.

Wood said the government was considering an “amnesty” for overstayers but could not say when a decision would be made. “I don’t want to give a date and set up a false expectation and raise hopes, I’ve given a very clear undertaking to people here today it will be soon.” Amnesties were a complex issue and official advice needed to be carefully considered, the minister warned.

The episode underscores the hypocrisy of successive New Zealand governments’ discriminatory immigration policies, particularly regarding workers from the Pacific. Since the early 1960s, low paid workers have been brought in at the demand of big business to fill labour shortages, only to be hunted down and expelled again, along with their families, when no longer required.

Last December, the NZ Human Rights Commission reported that workers in the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme were subjected to conditions akin to “modern slavery.” The program, introduced by the Helen Clark Labour government in 2007, allows for 16,000 Pacific workers annually to work on temporary visas in the \$NZ10 billion horticulture and viticulture industries.

RSE workers stay for up to seven months during any 11-month period. They are generally paid the so-called “Living Wage,” currently \$26 per hour, for a minimum of 30 hours per week. The pay rate, marginally above the legal minimum of \$22.70, is falsely promoted by the trade unions as what workers need to survive on. It is manifestly inadequate, and workers are subjected to degrading living conditions and draconian employer exploitation.

Heavy restrictions remain on permanent immigration. Islanders desperate to escape economic backwardness and underdevelopment by migrating to New Zealand

face a bureaucratic nightmare. An annual open ballot allows for up to 1,100 residency visas to be granted to Samoans, and 650 for other Pacific nations. The quota is being increased to 5,900 to make up for two years of no visas being granted during the height of the COVID pandemic.

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.

While its own anti-immigrant measures remain in force, Labour last month celebrated the signing of a new agreement that removes long-standing barriers for New Zealanders living in Australia. Under the new rules, those on temporary visas will be able to apply for full citizenship if they have lived in Australia for four years, and no longer have to meet restrictive income thresholds.

Underscoring the deeply cynical approach to immigration policy used by both governments, the agreement had nothing to do with recognising the basic rights of working people but was motivated partly by Canberra’s desperation to fill labour shortages. More fundamentally, the deal was bound up with the push for closer strategic and military ties between Australia and New Zealand as both countries integrate themselves into US-led war preparations against China.

As part of this agenda, Pacific Islanders face the possibility of being recruited as cannon fodder as the drive to war accelerates. The *Sydney Morning Herald* has reported that former Australian defence officials and some politicians are calling for Pacific Islanders to be allowed to enlist in the Australian Defence Force and offered an accelerated pathway to citizenship, with this also extended to citizens from “friendly nations” such as New Zealand, Japan, the United States and the United Kingdom.



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