

New Zealand criminal investigation into systemic migrant worker exploitation

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A New Zealand criminal investigation and government inquiry have been forced after dozens of migrant workers were discovered crowded inside a squalid three-bedroom home in south Auckland earlier this month.

Newshub reported on August 14 that the workers paid thousands of dollars for employment agreements with local recruitment contractors, but since arriving three months ago they had received no work or pay. The men called police after their food ran out and they had to resort to begging.

“Forty men were crammed into the filthy, overcrowded three-bedroom home in Auckland for months on end, sharing a single shower and cooking over one stove,” the report stated. “Three days, we don’t have nothing to eat, only just drinking water. No food, nothing,” Indian migrant Prasad Babu said.

The men paid tens of thousands of dollars each for job offers and signed contracts with New Zealand recruitment contractors. “[They] took \$20,000 from us to get a job. Why did [they] promise us you can give a better life here? There is no better life here,” Babu said. “Like beggars, we are going to the temple and eating the food there,” he explained.

Following the initial report, several similarly horrific stories emerged. Immigration officials began investigating four more Auckland properties housing dozens more victims. “In Papakura,” *Newshub* reported, “at least 20 more migrants were shoved into a grotty, run-down three-bedroom property. There was an overflowing rubbish bin, one toilet, and one shower.”

A total of 115 migrants from India and Bangladesh have so far been found living in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions in six houses across Auckland. In one case, a business couple have been using their former home to house up to 30 migrant

workers. The tenants, who rent “beds” at \$160 each per week, said there were no smoke alarms and sometimes no electricity. The wealthy owners of the \$2.97 million property are reportedly major donors to the conservative opposition National Party.

Elsewhere, Karen Gibney, president of the Latin American Community in Tauranga, told the *New Zealand Herald* on August 22 that about 200 people from Chile, Colombia, Argentina, Uruguay and Bolivia had paid between \$4,000 and \$10,000 for visas and employment agreements to work with construction company Buildhub. Many have received hardly any work or pay since arriving and some said they are “living like strays” and begging for food.

Two Chinese building workers interviewed by TVNZ last week said they had paid \$16,000 to an agent to be employed on the redevelopment of Waikeria Prison near Hamilton, with promises they could eventually qualify for residency and bring their families. The pair were paid just \$25 an hour and after eight weeks were suddenly sacked by the subcontractor via text message while still owed pay.

The migrants all entered the country through the Accredited Employer Work Visa (AEWV) scheme, introduced under pressure from big business last May, following the abandonment of COVID public health measures, to boost the labour supply. The Labour government boasted that its “immigration reset” would help build a “high wage, high skill economy.”

AEWV was, officially, meant to streamline the work visa system by inviting employers to apply for accreditation to hire overseas workers. Immigration NZ (INZ) then issues visas for workers who are linked with an “approved” employer. INZ has approved nearly 81,000 visas among about 27,900 accredited employers.

Under the scheme, migrants are tied to particular employers, creating the conditions for mistreatment and even slave-labour conditions. Unable to quit for fear of invalidating their visas and often with no avenue of complaint, they are frequently forced to work and live in illegal and subhuman conditions.

Immigration lawyer Alastair McClymont told Radio NZ that employers only had to self-declare they were financially sustainable and operating proper wage and time records. “So you can make one dollar’s profit, and then bring in \$600,000 worth of migrants,” who are then “dumped on the street with no jobs and no income,” he said.

According to a *Stuff* article on August 23, concerned INZ staff said employers were being allowed to bring in migrants without any paperwork or financial checks, even when immigration officers feared jobs may be fake, paid for with illegal premiums, or the migrants were at risk of exploitation.

Stuff was told only two employers have been declined accreditation. One INZ worker said: “Now what we have is thousands of migrants exploited and potentially thousands of businesses that shouldn’t have got accreditation.”

INZ currently has 164 active investigations underway. After initially denying any links between the Auckland cases and increased migrant exploitation, following “serious concerns” raised by an INZ whistleblower, Immigration Minister Andrew Little ordered a review of the scheme. Public Service Commissioner Peter Hughes promptly declared the “assurance review” would only check the policy was working as intended, rather than assessing the policy itself.

Migrant exploitation is an entrenched feature of New Zealand capitalism. Economics commentator Bernard Hickey has called the proliferation of scams a sign of the country’s “churn and burn” economy, describing it as the “Dubai of the South Pacific” for allowing “fraudulent agents and fly-by-night firms to bring in desperate and poor workers with suggestions of high-paid jobs and residency, only to pull the rug out from under their feet and leaving them indebted and even more desperate.”

Workers in the Recognised Seasonal Employer program, introduced by the then Labour government in 2007, which brings Pacific Islanders in on temporary

visas to work in the horticulture industry, were subjected to conditions akin to “modern slavery,” according to a Human Rights Commission report last December. The report cites numerous instances of basic human rights breaches, including in workers’ dire accommodation and authoritarian employer supervision.

At the same time, politicians continually scapegoat migrants for social problems including the housing crisis, inequality and pressure on public services. Labour assumed office in 2017, in coalition with the anti-Asian NZ First, promising to halve immigration numbers, then around 70,000 a year.

Labour has continued a cruel policy of deportations, including for people who “overstay” the term of their visa or who commit trivial breaches of their visa conditions. In early 2021, thousands of migrants and their supporters held a series of protests, including in India, over the government’s inhumane policies.

The systemic exploitation of immigrant workers is a vast global enterprise under capitalism, carried out by ruthless employers and unscrupulous agents, imposed by accommodating governments of all stripes. In the interests of profits, low pay, temporary work, summary sackings, ditching of basic rights and miserable living conditions are all on the agenda of every ruling elite as the economic crisis intensifies.

The international working class needs to come to the defence of immigrant workers. Workers must take a warning that these conditions are being imposed everywhere to set a precedent to be used as a battering ram against all workers in the coming period. The unification of struggles of workers globally, whatever their national origins or ethnicity, across all borders is an urgent necessity.



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