

International students in Canada protest anti-immigrant measures imposed by Prince Edward Island

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A significant protest of international students, many of whom are from India, has erupted in Prince Edward Island (PEI), Canada. The worker-students, most of whom are recent graduates, face deportation following sudden changes to provincial immigration rules in line with the Canadian ruling elite's intensified anti-immigrant agitation over the past several months.

The protests started on May 9 in the face of widespread hostility on the part of Canadian nationalists and proponents of a more restrictive immigration policy. On May 24, a number of protesters began a hunger strike in front of the building where the PEI legislature is located, with some even refusing to drink water for a time. The hunger strike was paused May 31 after a meeting between protesters and Jeff Young, head of the Provincial Office for Immigration.

The protest is a reaction to changes in PEI's immigration policy initiated in February to limit the number of immigrants, which the government justified by citing strains on healthcare and housing infrastructure. The disputed changes concern the Provincial Nominee Program (PNP), which is widely used as a pathway for international students aiming to secure permanent residency in Canada. Out of 12,000 applications for permanent residency in PEI, the province only nominates 1,590.

The changes include slashing by 25 percent the number of PNP nominees and restricting postgraduate work permits to students with qualifications in specific fields like construction, home-building, and healthcare. The provincial government has reduced the number of nominations for permits in the sales and services sector from 855 to 215. The policy changes have left many students unable to extend their work permits, resulting

in job losses and potential deportation even though the students have graduated and worked in Canada.

The protesting students have three main demands: first, to be "grandfathered" into the Provincial Nominee Program (PNP), allowing them to be exempt from the new regulations and continue under the old system; second, to have fair PNP draws without a point system, which they argue is unfair to those under 25; and third, an extension of their work permits to compensate for lost time and opportunities due to the policy changes.

PEI's policy changes were introduced after Liberal federal Immigration Minister Marc Miller announced in November that the target for permanent resident arrivals would be capped at 500,000 for two consecutive years. Then in January, the federal government introduced a limit on student visa admissions to Canada, setting it at 360,000 permits. On March 21, they further announced restrictions on temporary immigration, marking the first instance where the number of Non-Permanent Resident arrivals would be limited similarly to that of Permanent Resident arrivals.

The situation of many international students in Canada is dire. The entire Canadian immigration program is geared toward the interests of private business and profit. Educational institutions have increasingly resorted to attracting international students, who are generally charged tuition fees five times more than domestic students, as a way to compensate for sweeping government cuts to education funding. Additionally, with the growth of the profit motive in education, Canada has seen the emergence of what has been widely described as the diploma equivalent of "puppy mills," that is educational

institutions providing subpar education at a hefty fee and without proper support for the frequently impoverished students attracted by the prospect of potential permanent residency.

In an interview for *The PIE*, law professor Daljit Nirman stated: “In my opinion, the chaos in various provinces, including Prince Edward Island, stems from aggressive recruitment practices by college and university lobbyists. These institutions, driven by profit, have enlisted agents with hefty commissions, leading to uncontrolled international student enrollments.”

As the current protest is highlighting, international students often work in the most poorly remunerated sectors of the economy, and certain businesses rely on these workers to keep them “costs competitive.” The limited opposition to PEI’s policy changes from within the establishment has come almost entirely from the vultures who are in the habit of exploiting international students for their businesses. During the Greater Charlottetown Area Chamber of Commerce’s annual meeting, PEI Premier Dennis King faced questions from worried employers who wondered what would happen if this source of cheap labour ends. Some provincial Liberal and Green politicians have issued pro forma statements criticizing the racist attacks to which the protesting foreign students have been subjected.

One of the protest organizers, Rupinder Pal Singh, told CBC News, “There are some people who have been harassing us ... throwing glasses, cans on us, throwing water while people (in the round-the-clock hunger strike protest) were asleep.”

International students often get stuck in extreme poverty with low wage jobs and nothing to show for it in return. As organizers of the PEI protest campaign have pointed out, many were “frontline” service workers at the height of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Now, their already challenging path toward permanent residency and citizenship has been made even more difficult with the changes introduced by PEI’s Progressive Conservative government, which are themselves part of a broader nationwide trend.

The tightening of provincial and federal policies on immigration is a consequence of a concerted campaign spearheaded by the far right, but embraced by all

political parties, from the Conservatives to the ostensibly “left” New Democratic Party and the Quebec nationalist and separatist parties. Immigration, according to their lying narrative, is to blame for Canada’s deepening social crisis, in particular the shortage of affordable housing and the dilapidated state of public health care and education, rather than the decades-long public spending austerity enforced by all parties. The ruling class and its representatives in politics and the media aim with this vicious campaign to divide workers by scapegoating the more vulnerable immigrant and refugee section of the working class for the crisis of capitalism.



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