

# New Zealand woman held for weeks in ICE detention

John Braddock  
22 May 2026

A New Zealand woman, Everlee Wihongi, 37, a United States resident for more than 25 years, has been incarcerated for six weeks in a succession of ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) detention centres. She was initially detained on April 10 after returning from a visit to NZ.

Wihongi holds a US green card and is training to be a welder. When she was six years-old the family moved to Wisconsin. Her father, a rail worker, was recruited by US-based Wisconsin Central Transportation Corporation after NZ Rail was privatised in 1993.

Wihongi travelled to New Zealand for three weeks in March to celebrate an uncle's 80th birthday. She flew back to the United States on April 10 along with other family members. Instead of passing directly through immigration at LAX as she had numerous times before, she was taken aside and detained by ICE officers.

Everlee's sister-in-law, Courtney Wihongi, told Radio NZ (RNZ) that ICE officers initially told her they needed to do a few checks and that she would see family members on the other side of the baggage carousel. However, after a distressing seven hour wait, the family received a phone call from Everlee telling them there was an issue with an historic drug conviction and she was being sent to an ICE processing facility near Los Angeles.

The family said Wihongi had a conviction for possession of marijuana dating back more than a decade and that she had previously travelled in and out of the US several times without any issue.

Everlee is one of thousands of innocent people facing interrogation, imprisonment and potential deportation from the US, including many who are legal US residents or even citizens. According to the *Guardian*, 60,310 people were in detention as of April 4, and 468,450 people had been deported since Trump's

inauguration.

The victims have included Sarah Shaw, another NZ citizen who was living legally in the US, and her six-year-old son Isaac. Both were kidnapped and detained by ICE last July while seeking to re-enter the US after a brief visit to Vancouver. Shaw, 33, and Isaac, were held for three weeks in barbaric conditions in the Dilley Processing Centre in Texas before being released following an international outcry.

Everlee, after a month in ICE detention at Adelanto, California, phoned her family on May 10 informing them she had had a "rough couple of days" while being transferred to an ICE facility in Texas, then three days later to the Eloy detention centre in Arizona. Family members told the media that she was "shackled for hours, waiting in hot weather, not given food, sleeping on the ground, not being able to shower."

Wihongi's Wisconsin-based lawyer, Marc Christopher, told *Stuff* that for a 3-day period nobody knew her whereabouts, while her profile had vanished from the ICE tracking website.

A New York-based NZ journalist, David Farrier discovered that while in Texas Everlee had been placed in the notorious "Camp East Montana" at Fort Bliss. Farrier noted: "ICE is known to do this—moving detainees suddenly, from place to place" and, according to the *American Prospect*, "hiding clients from both their families and their lawyers."

Farrier reported that Camp East is the "largest and worst ICE detainment centre" in the US—an industrial tent city with 3,000 detainees but just 2,000 beds. Recent inspections found 49 standards violations, including inadequate medical care and failure to "accurately document required checks to prevent significant self-harm and suicide." Of 25 people who had died in ICE detention since last October, three were

at Camp East.

Marc Christopher has warned that conditions are “very difficult” for Everlee. Her court appearance initially scheduled for June was removed when she was placed on another court’s docket in Arizona. Her lawyers are seeking to vacate the drug conviction so ICE will no longer have any basis to keep her detained. But if her case goes to the Board of Immigration Appeals, she could well remain incarcerated for the next 18 months or longer, he said.

Everlee’s mother Betty told *Stuff* on May 13 that her daughter’s hands and feet were shackled during the transfer to Texas. “Everlee was telling me it was really sad, there were a lot of elderly and there were children and they were shackled too,” she said. “The vehicles they were transported in were very overcrowded.” The rooms that they were later put in were “like cages,” with no beds, forcing them to sleep on the concrete floor.

Betty told RNZ on April 28 she was terrified for her daughter, who had at Adelanto been sharing a room with 46 others. They were confined to the room for 22 hours a day, one side of the room was bunks and the other side was tables. They all ate and slept in the same room.

Betty also told the *Guardian* that Everlee had described the working-class layers caught up in the ICE dragnet. “There are nurses in scrubs, road workers, pregnant mothers with children—all shackled,” she said. “They’re not gangsters, they are not people causing trouble, they are just normal people who want a good life.”

The family has complained of a lack of support from the New Zealand government and called on Foreign Minister Winston Peters to intervene. No one from the NZ consulate had visited Everlee in detention and they had not received any support in finding a lawyer.

Peters however hung Wihongi out to dry, bluntly declaring she would “have to be facing the death penalty” for him to intervene. He blamed her for allegedly failing to declare the drug conviction. Asked if the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) had a responsibility to support her, Peters told RNZ that MFAT “does not provide legal support in that context, it never has, otherwise it would cost us an absolute fortune.”

Asked by a reporter if he agreed with the US

immigration policy and the way it is being implemented, Peters said, “It is not our responsibility to comment on other countries’ immigration policy, we don’t do that, it’s their democracy, that’s for American voters to decide.”

Peters, who leads the far-right populist NZ First Party, has played a key role in strengthening NZ’s military and strategic alliance with the Trump administration. He has refused to condemn Washington’s blatant crimes, including the US-Israeli genocide in Gaza and unprovoked war against Iran, the attack on Venezuela and the bombing of hundreds of fishing vessels.

Like Trump, Peters frequently delivers anti-immigrant and law-and-order tirades. Last July he stated that there were “concerns” in places like England about migrants “who don’t salute the flag, don’t salute the values of the country, don’t salute the people who were there before them.” He demonised immigrants for “changing cities, changing centuries of development and social life, and people feel at risk because of it.”

The fate of Everlee Wihongi underscores that nobody is exempt from the sweeping attacks on basic democratic rights by the Trump administration, no matter their national origin or immigration status. The brutal regime in the US is, moreover, directly facilitated by Trump’s far-right accomplices in governments around the world now implementing a similar agenda.

As the WSWS has explained, the fascistic assault on immigrants is aimed at scapegoating them for the deepening poverty and social inequality caused by the crisis of the capitalist system. The fight to defend immigrant workers, therefore, “can succeed only through the unified mobilization of the working class as a whole—black, white, native-born, immigrant, documented and undocumented alike,” as part of the fight for international socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**