

# New Zealand woman released after 73 days in ICE detention

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A New Zealand woman, Everlee Wihongi, aged 37, was released on June 19 after spending 73 days in US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention centres. On Facebook, Wihongi said that her ordeal of more than two months was “horrific.”

Wihongi holds a US Green Card and has been a permanent US resident since the year 2000. When she was six years-old the family moved to Wisconsin after her father, a rail worker, was recruited by Wisconsin Central Transportation Corporation following the privatisation of NZ Rail in 1993. Her Green Card has never lapsed or expired.

Wihongi posted: “I was never informed why I was being detained. I was never given official charges from ICE to why I was detained either. I was only told I violated immigration law, but never what law.” Wihongi had a conviction for possession of marijuana dating back more than a decade but had previously travelled in and out of the US several times without any issue.

Wihongi was initially detained while transiting LAX on April 10 on returning from a visit to New Zealand. Instead of passing directly through immigration, she was taken aside by ICE officers. After a seven-hour wait, family members travelling with her received a phone call from her saying there was an issue with the historic drug conviction and she was being sent to an ICE facility near Los Angeles.

After a month in ICE detention at Adelanto, California, Wihongi was transferred to the notorious Camp East Montana facility at Fort Bliss, Texas and three days later to the Eloy detention centre in Arizona. Family members told New Zealand 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 three-day period nobody knew her whereabouts, after her profile vanished from the ICE

tracking website. A New York-based NZ journalist, David 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.”

Christopher warned that conditions were “very difficult” for Everlee. A court appearance scheduled for June was removed when she was placed on another court’s docket in Arizona. Her lawyers sought to vacate the drug conviction so ICE would no longer have any basis to keep her detained, but warned if the case went to the Board of Immigration Appeals she could remain incarcerated for 18 months or longer.

According to Christopher, the government continued to treat Wihongi as an “arriving alien,” yet the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) had not produced any evidence to establish that classification. Nor had DHS submitted any conviction records or other evidence to support the position they were taking before the court.

Wihongi’s drug conviction was eventually successfully challenged in a Wisconsin court on the legal grounds of ineffective assistance of counsel. Her legal team argued that her original defense attorney provided incorrect advice by assuring her that pleading guilty to the drug charge would not adversely affect her immigration status. The attorney was later disbarred for forging documents and lying to clients.

Following the successful court case, the government was forced to agree there was no legal basis to continue holding her. A joint motion to dismiss the removal proceedings was accepted by a court, but it took nearly two weeks for her to be released. Wihongi’s sister-in-law Courtney told Radio NZ (RNZ) that ICE had been “playing games,” saying she was “getting lost in the shuffle around of paperwork not being completed.” ICE authorities had not returned her passport, driver’s license or Green Card.

Christopher said NZ consular assistance could well have helped expedite her release. A spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) told *Stuff* the New Zealand government was unable to influence the immigration decisions of other governments, but that MFAT continued to provide unspecified “consular assistance” to Wihongi and her family.

In fact, throughout the ordeal, Foreign Affairs Minister Winston Peters refused any diplomatic assistance, bluntly declaring she would “have to be facing the death penalty” for him to intervene. Asked if MFAT had a responsibility to support Wihongi, Peters told RNZ that the ministry “does not provide legal support in that context, it never has, otherwise it would cost us an absolute fortune.”

Wihongi thanked her parents, family, friends, lawyer and supporters, saying they had gathered legal documents, raised awareness, contacted the NZ government and helped secure specialist legal representation during her detention. She also highlighted former co-workers who rallied to get endorsements for her case. “They moved mountains for me,” she declared.

Wihongi’s lawyer explained that her situation was one faced by thousands, saying: “That is a very arbitrary and strict reading of the immigration laws resulting in deportations of tens if not hundreds of thousands of people.”

Another NZ citizen, Sarah Shaw, living legally in the US, and her six-year-old son were kidnapped by ICE in July 2025 while seeking to re-enter the US after a visit to Vancouver. The pair were held for three weeks in barbaric conditions in the Dilley Processing Center in Texas before being released following an international outcry.

Thousands of innocent people are still facing interrogation, imprisonment and deportation, including many who are legal US residents or even citizens. With more than 63,000 people languishing in ICE detention centres, the Trump administration is expanding street ambushes, worksite raids and mass kidnappings across the country. More than 10,000 people were recently seized in just five days amid a major surge ordered by the White House.

The popular outrage expressed in the millions-strong “No Kings” protests across America has not abated. In Minneapolis on July 4 hundreds marched to the Justice Department with 52 coffins representing the deaths so far in ICE custody. According to government statistics, 33 people died in ICE custody in 2025. During the first half of 2026, watchdog groups and official notices indicate that 21 more deaths have been publicised.

The deepening opposition to Trump’s drive to dictatorship finds no expression in the two-party political system. The Democrats have repeatedly voted to fund ICE and other repressive agencies, while remaining silent on the persecution of left-wing and anti-ICE protesters, some of whom have been prosecuted as “terrorists.”

The experience of Everlee Wihongi underscores that nobody is exempt from the sweeping attacks on basic democratic rights by the Trump administration, regardless of 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.

In New Zealand, Minister Peters’ right-wing NZ First Party is whipping up anti-immigrant sentiment ahead of the November election and is calling for recent migrants to be stripped of the right to vote.

The opposition Labour and Green Parties criticised the government for not doing enough to help Wihongi, but their position is thoroughly hypocritical. The 2017–2023 Labour-Greens government—which included NZ First in its first three years—implemented draconian anti-immigrant policies including “dawn raids” to seize and deport people who had overstayed their visas.

All the established parties are complicit in efforts to scapegoat immigrants for the housing crisis, social inequality and pressure on rundown public services, which are the product of capitalism.



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