Sri Lankan migrant worker speaks out against Labour government’s attack on residency rights

Our reporter
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“We deserve fairness. We deserve dignity. We deserve a future”

The World Socialist Web Site (WSWS) is publishing the following letter it has received from a Sri Lankan migrant working in the UK. We have changed their name to Ravi for protection. “Ravi”, a qualified chef employed in the hospitality sector, describes the profound uncertainty created by the Labour government’s retrospective extension of the qualifying period for Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) from five to ten years. Having come to Britain on a Skilled Worker visa and built a life here expecting to qualify for permanent residency after five years, they explain the devastating personal consequences of changing the rules after migrants have made enormous sacrifices to work and contribute to society. Their letter also highlights how the threat to migrants’ immigration status leaves sponsored workers vulnerable to exploitation and intimidation by employers.

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Dear WSWS,

We listened to Shabana Mahmood’s speech announcing the proposed changes to Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) for migrant workers with disbelief and profound frustration. She began by declaring that the policy would be “guided above all by fairness”. But where is the fairness in promising migrants the prospect of settlement after five years when they came to the UK, only to extend that qualifying period to ten years after they have built their lives here, worked, paid taxes and contributed to society?

What was particularly hurtful was not simply the severity of these proposed changes, but the dismissive and prejudicial way in which Mahmood spoke about migrants’ skills, worth and contribution. Her remarks demeaned people whose labour keeps essential sectors of the UK economy functioning.

With one stroke, the government proposes doubling the ILR qualifying period from five to ten years for tens of thousands of migrant workers outside social care, including those earning between £25,000 and £50,000 a year and working in often insecure, demanding conditions across hospitality, agriculture and other sectors. These are workers who have organised their lives around the rules and assurances under which they migrated, only to find the goalposts being moved after their arrival.

I am a fully qualified chef with extensive professional experience, yet I earn around £30,000 a year. My spouse and I both work full-time in the hospitality sector. By the government's own definition, we are net contributors to the economy. We work, pay taxes and contribute to the communities in which we live. Yet the government's proposals would treat our years of work and contribution as though they count for less simply because our earnings fall below an arbitrary threshold.

I came to the UK approximately two and a half years ago through the Skilled Worker visa route. Like thousands of other migrant workers, I came here with genuine hopes, dreams and expectations. We made significant sacrifices, invested our savings, left our families and homes behind, and built our futures around the immigration rules that existed when we made the decision to come.

The five-year ILR route was an important part of that decision. Now, suddenly changing those expectations and extending the settlement period to ten years is deeply unfair. We cannot simply be expected to accept that the terms on which we built our futures can be changed after we have made enormous personal and financial sacrifices.

Why, then, are we talking only about care workers? What about the thousands of other Skilled Worker visa holders whose futures are equally threatened?

There are thousands of other migrant workers employed in restaurants, hotels, hospitality and other industries who are facing similar difficulties. We are also contributing to the British economy, paying taxes, working in businesses and filling essential vacancies that employers struggle to fill.

Many of us work extremely long hours, sometimes 15–18 hours a day, under enormous pressure. Unfortunately, some sponsored workers, like us, experience exploitation and poor working conditions. We often feel unable to speak up about our rights because our employers hold significant power over our sponsorship and immigration status.

If we complain about unreasonable working hours, unfair treatment or violations of our employment rights, we may fear losing our jobs and sponsorship. This creates a situation in which vulnerable migrant workers feel trapped, powerless and unable to defend themselves. The threat of losing our right to remain in the country can become a powerful weapon in the hands of unscrupulous employers.

We are not asking for special treatment. We are asking for fairness, dignity, consistency and respect for the commitments and

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expectations under which we came to this country.

It is particularly concerning that immigration policy changes can have such a significant impact on people who have already spent years building their lives in the UK. Extending the ILR qualifying period without adequate protection for existing visa holders raises serious questions about fairness, legitimate expectations and the security of people's futures.

Furthermore, we are concerned about the disproportionate impact these changes could have on migrant workers from Asian and other non-European countries. Everyone who works in this country deserves to be treated fairly, regardless of their nationality or background.

This is not simply an issue affecting care workers. It concerns all of us who came to Britain through the Skilled Worker visa route. Chefs, restaurant and hotel workers, agricultural workers and thousands of others must recognise that our concerns are shared. Dividing migrant workers by occupation will only weaken our ability to defend our common interests.

We must speak out collectively against these proposals. We should not remain silent out of fear or assume that the changes will affect somebody else. If one group of workers can have its settlement expectations taken away today, others can face the same treatment tomorrow.

We must come together across occupations, workplaces and nationalities to demand:

- An end to the proposed extension of the ILR qualifying period from five to ten years.

- Protection of existing Skilled Worker visa holders against retrospective changes to their settlement expectations.

- Recognition that these changes affect workers across all Skilled Worker occupations, not just care workers.

- An end to the exploitation of sponsored workers and the use of immigration status as a weapon of intimidation by employers.

- The right to secure settlement, dignity and equal treatment, without arbitrary salary thresholds, discriminatory conditions or ever-changing immigration rules.

As the government refuses to listen to the legitimate concerns of migrant workers, we must raise our voices collectively through lawful and peaceful democratic action, public campaigns and protests.

We deserve fairness. We deserve dignity. We deserve a future.

To all Skilled Worker visa holders, whatever your occupation or nationality: this concerns you. Do not remain silent. Stand together, support one another and make your voices heard. Our rights and our futures are worth defending.

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Dear Ravi,

Your call for a mobilisation of working people against the stripping away of residency rights for migrant workers at the stroke of a pen gives a powerful voice to the broad-based opposition to the Labour government’s reactionary measures.

Both skilled workers and care workers have been caught up in the Labour government’s anti-migrant dragnet. As the WSWS article explains, many care workers and their families who arrived before May 2025 have been disqualified from the limited reprieve that allowed them to apply after five years for Indefinite Leave to Remain, and have been told they must start the process again.

The wedge which has been driven between migrant workers by the Burnham government has the backing of the trade union bureaucracy, with UNISON claiming the “worst aspects” of the tearing up of migrant’s rights to residency have been stopped. No section of the trade union bureaucracy can be entrusted to conduct a principled fight.

The continued scapegoating of migrants and refugees for the collapse of public services is enabled by the union bureaucracy and their partnership with the government. The Trades Union Congress and its affiliated unions are suppressing any mobilisation of the working class against the savage cuts and austerity being enforced by the Burnham government.

To oppose this, rank-and-file committees must be established to unite every section of the working class against the employers, the Labour government and the capitalist system. Migrant and British-born workers face the same attacks: declining wages, insecure employment, deteriorating public services and the erosion of democratic rights.

The attempt to divide workers through immigration controls, differential residency rights and the threat of deportation weakens the collective strength of the entire working class and gives employers a means of driving down conditions for all. The answer is not to appeal to the government or the trade union bureaucracy, but to organise independently across workplaces, industries and neighbourhoods, in defence of every worker's right to live and work free from super-exploitation and the constant threat of deportation.

The fight for full citizenship and equal democratic rights for all is inseparable from the struggle for decent wages, secure employment, housing, healthcare and education. Defending one section of the working class is inseparable from defending the rights and conditions of the entire class.

Fraternally,

Tony Robson

WSWS UK Industrial Editor

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