

# Migrants challenge visa processing delays by New Zealand authorities

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1 July 2020

As an election approaches in September, the New Zealand government, a coalition between the Labour Party, the right-wing nationalist NZ First and the Greens, is intensifying its anti-immigrant measures.

Like its counterparts throughout the world, the government is seeking to divert anger over mass job losses triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic into xenophobia against immigrants, who make up a substantial portion of the population. According to the 2018 census, more than one in four people in New Zealand were born overseas.

Thousands of temporary migrant workers who have lost their jobs in recent months are ineligible for welfare payments and are being given “short term” relief including food parcels and vouchers. Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters, leader of NZ First, has told jobless migrants to “go home,” declaring that the economy cannot support them. This is despite the government handing out billions of dollars in subsidies to businesses.

Meanwhile, tens of thousands of people applying for residency through the Skilled Migrant Category (SMC) are facing interminable delays and many fear they may be forced to leave the country. Immigration New Zealand (INZ) has a backlog of over 15,000 SMC and Work to Residence applications, representing more than 32,000 people. Many have been waiting a year or longer for a decision.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with members of the recently established Facebook group Migrants NZ about their experiences. Migrants NZ, which has more than 4,600 members, has drafted a petition calling on the government to urgently process the applications, “make the process transparent and treat all applicants equally.”

The petition states: “We were promised that our

applications would be processed in a reasonable timeframe. However, without any clear reasons we are forced to wait for a decision well over a year which takes an immense mental and financial toll on us and our families.”

Speaking to the *Indian Weekender* on Sunday, Immigration Minister Iain Lees-Galloway did not give a definite timeframe for visa processing or explanation for the backlog. He said waiting times would likely “increase for the foreseeable future” due to increased numbers of applications.

Anna, who is from Germany, told the WSWs she applied in May 2019 with her partner and their son. Her partner moved to New Zealand from Ireland seven years ago to work on the rebuild of Christchurch, which was devastated by an earthquake in 2011.

“When we applied we had one year left on our work visas, which we thought was sufficient,” she said. INZ estimated the processing time would be nine months, but this target was changed to 17 months. A year and a half ago a small number of applications were given priority, including people earning over \$51 an hour and selected professions such as teachers and healthcare workers, “and the rest they’ve just stopped processing.”

Anna said the delay was “probably politically motivated,” noting that before the 2017 election Labour and NZ First “were saying: we will reduce immigrant numbers, and that’s what they’re doing at the moment.”

She said it was “hard to understand” how Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern could claim to lead the “kindest and most transparent government ever. Because this is not transparent, this is not kind. I’ve been talking to a lot of people recently and it has a massive impact on their mental health.”

Anna said her partner had worked for the same company for six years “and it doesn’t count for anything. I find it very frustrating when you put so much towards a country and its economy and the rebuild, and you’re just not given anything in return.”

She said the Facebook group gave people “a platform to share their stories and realise that they’re not alone in all this. It seems like to Immigration and the government we’re just a number. We want to get heard. We want people to understand the situation we’re in.”

A migrant from Britain, who we will call Jessica, said she and her partner had spent about \$4,000 on applications and related costs. They have been waiting 18 months for INZ’s decision, despite initially being told to expect an answer by October 2019.

She was angry that INZ had received millions of dollars in fees from migrants for applications that are not being processed. The agency was “getting away with this, I don’t know how. They’re not accountable to anyone.”

“I’ve been here about three years and my partner’s been here for four,” Jessica said. Her partner works for an internet service provider “in critical infrastructure in Christchurch that doctors and nurses need to do their jobs, but that counts for nothing.”

Jessica is pregnant and due to give birth in December. Her current work visa expires in January 2021. “I don’t particularly want to go home with a one-month-old baby halfway across the world without a job,” she said. “It’s just awful, living in limbo.”

Visa applicants were “being fobbed off by the government” and given “nonsensical” excuses, she said. When she recently complained to her local MP, Jessica was told the delays were because of increased applications due to New Zealand being perceived as relatively safe from COVID-19. “But we’ve been waiting over 18 months. It makes no sense.”

Jessica believed the government was deliberately stalling “so that come election time they can say: ‘look how few migrants we’ve let in this year, aren’t we fantastic?’ Just to appeal to those that don’t want any more immigrants. I see no other reason, to be quite honest.”

A worker from China, based in Auckland, who wished to remain anonymous, told the WSWs he applied for residency almost a year ago and was very

anxious about the future. He said the government was “trying to make people’s lives miserable to please a small number of anti-immigrant people. This whole thing is so inhumane. People have mental health issues from waiting so long. Every day they worry about their job or their application, about everything.”

He believed NZ First was “hijacking the whole process.” The party previously campaigned to cap immigration at 10,000 people a year, down from over 50,000 in recent years. Labour, supported by the Greens, gave NZ First considerable power in the coalition, even though the notoriously xenophobic party is very unpopular; NZ First received only 7.2 percent of the votes in 2017 and is currently polling below 2 percent.



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