

New Zealand's border restrictions leave thousands of students stranded

Tom Peters
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Thousands of international students, many of whom have spent tens of thousands of dollars to study in New Zealand, and have received study visas, have been unable to enter the country since it imposed draconian border restrictions in March.

They are among thousands of people with visas, entitling them to live in New Zealand, who remain stranded overseas. Hundreds of migrant workers have protested in India, demanding the same treatment as NZ residents and citizens, tens of thousands of whom have been able to return and spend two weeks in hotels that are serving as quarantine facilities.

Following the October 17 election, the state agency Education NZ told the Labour Party government the country's border closure "has been the longest and most restrictive in the world," and could impact tertiary institutions financially. Universities NZ said last month there were 5,200 students enrolled in New Zealand who had been stuck offshore all year. Several universities are likely to cut more jobs next year, due to the decline in revenue.

The government has announced that it will allow entry to just 250 overseas postgraduate students, most of whom will arrive in the New Year. On December 3, however, Education Minister Chris Hipkins told Radio NZ it was unlikely the borders would open to significant numbers of foreign students for another 12 to 18 months.

Tens of thousands of migrant workers are similarly stranded, with no idea when they will be able to come to New Zealand. Their lives are in limbo, they are unable to find work and in severe financial distress. Some have been separated from their family members in New Zealand.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's government, which is being glorified in the world's media for its "historic"

ethnic and gender diversity, has in fact actively discriminated against immigrants and scapegoated them for the economic crisis.

Until December, migrants on temporary visas who lost their jobs were not eligible for unemployment benefits, forced instead to rely on food parcels and other emergency relief. Former foreign minister Winston Peters, from the right-wing nationalist NZ First Party, declared that they should "go home" as the country would not support them. Tens of thousands of migrants who have applied for permanent residency are facing interminable delays from Immigration New Zealand (INZ).

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Tincy, from India, who helped organise a petition with nearly 600 signatures to the New Zealand parliament "to allow international students with valid visas, who have already paid their 2020 study fees, to enter New Zealand and pursue their studies."

Tincy had received a student visa and paid to study coding at Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology (NMIT) in the South Island, when the border closed in late March. Her brother and sister-in-law are already living and working in New Zealand. She had taken out an education loan from a bank in December 2019, pledging her house, as well as gold, which had been a wedding gift, as collateral.

She has been unable to find work this year because employers "are asking for at least six months, one or two-year contracts. Most of the students have been forced into this situation because they resigned from their jobs [to go to NZ]. Some still have to feed their family and they are in such a pathetic situation. I got married in 2019, and after six months we planned to move and start a family, we were thinking about having a baby." These plans are now on hold.

Tincy explained that many students were being forced to rely on their families for accommodation and other support, placing immense strain on their relationships. “We paid fees, and our future is in someone else’s hands,” Tincy said.

She said students were sending emails “on a daily basis” to Immigration New Zealand (INZ) “begging them for some kind of update.” The only reply is an automated message saying that the border remains closed. Some students were reluctant to speak out, even to “ask the government what will happen; they are scared that if they say something the government is going to reject their visa.”

“At least the government should consider the people who paid their fees in the beginning of 2020 and have a valid visa. We are really struggling. We have a career gap and a financial crisis; we are going through depression.

“One of my friends resigned from my company to go overseas to the UK. In the coming April he’s going to finish his studies; he’s paid his tuition fees back and he’s looking after his family, and I am still waiting,” she said.

Emil, who had been accepted into an early childhood education course at New Zealand Tertiary College in Christchurch, has been stuck in India all year and reliant on his parents for support. He told the WSWS he had borrowed approximately \$30,500 to pay his fees and would have to pay interest on the loan. International students have to pay unsubsidised fees, which can be three times what domestic students pay.

“I don’t know how much longer I can hold on,” he said. “The bank may be asking me to return the money soon, because they have issued the money for international education, but the purpose [of the loan] hasn’t been met.”

Emil had been accepted into Rajiv Gandhi National Aviation University and Madras Christian College, but had decided to go to New Zealand instead to study to become a teacher. He has been unable to find work this year because employers were asking for a long-term contract.

“My neighbours, other family members are all asking when I will do something. I don’t have any answer for them. I can’t plan anything, I can’t do anything. International students are truly an important part of the economy of New Zealand, and [the government] is not

giving us any consideration,” he said. “They are not concerned about our money, they’re not concerned about our time. Many of us have lost our jobs. It’s a burden on us.”

Emil also criticised the lack of any information from INZ. “We are ready to quarantine for 14 days or 28 days, we can pay for that,” he said. He said he was still hoping to come to New Zealand, but because of his experience this year he advised other international students to choose a different country.



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