

Thousands of students affected by New Zealand's anti-Chinese travel ban

By Tom Peters
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The New Zealand government's ban on anyone entering the country from China, apart from NZ citizens and residents, has provoked shock and anxiety among immigrants, foreign students and workers.

The ban is the first such action taken in decades and was imposed despite no cases of the novel coronavirus being reported in New Zealand. No similar restrictions were placed on travel between NZ and Samoa last year, when the negligence of both governments caused measles to spread from NZ to the impoverished Pacific island country and killed 83 people.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has repeatedly warned against travel bans to combat coronavirus, saying "such restrictions can have the effect of increasing fear and stigma, with little public health benefit." Despite this, the US, Australia, New Zealand and several other countries have banned most inbound travel from China.

These decisions were politically motivated. In New Zealand, the Labour Party and its coalition partner, the right-wing nationalist NZ First, have long scapegoated Chinese and other Asian immigrants for inequality, the housing shortage and public services that are under-resourced due to decades of cuts and austerity. Both parties will campaign for an election in September by whipping up nationalism to divide the working class and divert attention from the government's failure to alleviate poverty.

The promotion of anti-Chinese xenophobia is also part of the efforts to integrate New Zealand with the Trump administration's trade and economic war and preparations for military conflict with China. The government has labelled China and Russia major "threats" to the international order and has enthusiastically supported a greater US military presence in the Pacific to counter China.

The pro-government *Daily Blog* has seized on the coronavirus to repeat its demands for a "large scale increase in Army, Navy and Air Force" and turning the country into a "fortress" against immigrants.

Thousands of Chinese students are affected by the travel ban, with a major impact on the New Zealand economy. In 2018 there were 36,000 students from China, almost a third of all foreign students studying in the country. It is not known how many have been barred from travelling to New Zealand, but the University of Auckland estimated nearly 3,000 of its 4,000 Chinese students could be turned away. Courses are due to begin in the first week of March.

The *New Zealand Herald* noted that "international education brings in \$5.1 billion a year and is New Zealand's fourth largest export earner, supporting 47,500 jobs." Auckland University vice-chancellor Stuart McCutcheon told Radio NZ on February 4 that the travel ban "came completely out of the blue. There was no consultation, we knew nothing about it... we don't know the justification for it." He added: "We don't know the basis on which the ban will be lifted. We don't know when it's likely to be lifted."

The International Students Association's Sabrina Alhady told the *Herald* all Asian students were feeling stigmatised. "They are getting questions: 'Are you from China?'" she said. "It's really quite awful at the moment."

A Chinese student in Wellington, who asked not to be named for fear of repercussions, told the *World Socialist Web Site* he was concerned by the sudden imposition of the ban: "Universities, travel agencies, have their opinions been consulted? Where are the democratic processes, the checks and balances? The government is really powerful in emergency situations.

"I can't travel back to China now, as I wouldn't be

able to get back in [to New Zealand],” he said. “What I’m worried about is how long will this ban last? Will it really be 14 days? I don’t think so. The virus will probably last a month or two. Chinese students will not be able to come back here.”

The student believed the Chinese government “could have acted earlier” to stop the spread of the virus and “the situation could have been better to some degree.”

During the more than five years he has been in New Zealand he commented that he had seen a “constant decline and deterioration” in relations with China and the travel ban was “a dream come true” for right-wing nationalists like NZ First. “It provides a very good opportunity for racist sentiments that used to be dormant to reappear,” he said.

He noted that the Trump administration was using coronavirus to argue that “China is a threat, engagement is wrong, containment is self-evident. Unfortunately, this is the trend towards nationalism. The world is being separated into blocs. This outbreak will definitely cause great economic trauma in China and around the world.

“We are in a very dangerous political situation. The future could be very dark, there could be war. This virus outbreak shows it is very important for us to work together rather than just isolate ourselves, and we have to think about whether our current political and economic system actually has the potential to further collaboration.”

The WSWS also spoke to a Chinese worker in Auckland, who said that “there is a lot of fear-mongering in the media” and the attempts to debunk myths about the coronavirus were “too little, too late.”

“A lot of social media and mainstream media outlets are trying to spread fake news,” he said. “The biggest story right after the outbreak was a video of a Chinese woman eating a bat. This was later confirmed that it was a lady eating a home-bred fruit bat and it had nothing to do with the virus.” The video was republished by the *NZ Herald*, which falsely claimed it was filmed in China, triggering numerous anti-Chinese comments. In fact, it was filmed in Palau.

The *Herald* also republished an article linking the coronavirus to “part of a secret biological weapons program” in Wuhan—based on unsubstantiated claims by an Israeli intelligence source.

“China doesn’t have democracy and people are not really happy,” the worker told the WSWS, but the “campaign to smear China” would only strengthen the Chinese government by making people see it as a “lesser evil.”

“The US started it and then in New Zealand and all around the world there is this travel ban. I’m worried about it as an immigrant. There have been some extreme cases of racism from the ultra-right in New Zealand, saying they should take out all the Chinese immigrants. Hopefully things will not escalate to that level, which would be really bad for everyone.”

He had seen “a lot of anger in the immigrant community” towards the Labour-led government’s anti-immigrant policies and racist outbursts, but many migrants feared speaking out publicly.

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