

Couples and families separated by New Zealand's border restrictions

By Tom Peters
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Draconian border restrictions imposed by New Zealand's Labour Party-led government have resulted in tens of thousands of people being stuck overseas indefinitely. Many are separated from their partners, family members and jobs and livelihoods.

In response to the coronavirus pandemic, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced the closure of the border on March 19 for the first time in the country's history. Shortly afterwards the country entered a lockdown, which has since been lifted. Only citizens and permanent residents are being allowed into the country, and on arrival are quarantined for two weeks in hotels overseen by the military.

The rundown, under-funded public health system, and lack of testing, contact tracing and quarantine facilities meant that outbreaks of COVID-19 could quickly spread and cause thousands of deaths if such action was not taken.

The border closure, however, is causing significant hardship for migrants, including many who normally live and work in New Zealand but were overseas during the lockdown and are not allowed to return. This inhumane policy is part of a broader attack on immigrants' rights, including the government's denial of unemployment benefits to thousands of temporary migrants, and its refusal to process tens of thousands of residency applications.

On July 20, *Stuff* reported that supermarket manager Harpreet Kaur, her husband Sukhjinder Singh, a dairy farm manager, and their four-year-old son, have been unable to return to their home in the NZ province of Taranaki. They were stranded in India after travelling there in March to visit a sick relative.

"All the family's personal belongings are in New Zealand, while they continue to pay for electricity, car finance and insurance despite having no income for

four months," the report stated. Their applications to Immigration New Zealand (INZ) for a "humanitarian" exemption to re-enter have been rejected.

A petition presented to parliament this week, with over 2,500 signatures, calls for the government "to lift border restrictions against holders of temporary work visas, like the Essential Skills Work Visa, with existing jobs and lives in New Zealand."

Former Immigration Minister Iain Lees-Galloway—who was dismissed from the role by Ardern this week following revelations about an affair he had with a staff member—told TVNZ on July 6 that temporary migrants who are overseas would likely be barred for months.

Many partners of citizens or permanent residents (PRs) are also barred, despite an initial statement from Ardern that they would be exempted from the border closure.

The Facebook group "NZ Citizens and PRs Separated from Partners by NZ Border Closure" is promoting another petition, with more than 2,500 signatures so far. It calls on parliament to "urge the government to fulfil their pledge of reuniting NZ citizens and permanent residents with their partners, by directing Immigration New Zealand (INZ) to process Visitor, Work and Resident Visas for partners of New Zealanders stuck offshore."

A member of the group, Maz, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that she was stuck in Scotland, unable to return to live with her husband, a New Zealand citizen. After the border closure was announced, with just 12 hours' notice, Maz booked flights but was turned away when seeking to board at the airport, after airline staff phoned INZ officials.

"According to INZ and the Labour government's criteria, [partners] should be able to enter the country,"

she said. “But they stopped processing offshore visas in March. Some people have been waiting from the beginning of last year for a partnership visa.” INZ’s visa application centres outside New Zealand remain closed.

Partners of NZ citizens can still enter if they travel together as a couple. Some New Zealanders have made expensive international journeys in order to bring their partner back. Maz said her husband would likely have to travel to Scotland to do this.

“One of our members went to Tokyo to get her husband,” Maz explained. “Many people will go offshore to get their spouses and come back because that’s the only legitimate way. That’s why we started this petition to point out the ridiculousness of it.”

Maz said many partners had applied for a “humanitarian” exemption to enter New Zealand. “But it’s almost impossible. We have no idea what the criteria is. There’s no transparency around that whatsoever. There’s one woman whose partner is Cuban and he is going hungry and that’s still not enough for a humanitarian exemption. She’s worried about him, but that is falling on deaf ears,” she explained.

Lees-Galloway told TVNZ there was a “high bar” for such exemptions, and people who had family in their home country were “unlikely” to qualify.

On June 16, Radio NZ reported that Auckland woman Ruth McDowall’s partner Teddy has been stuck in Ghana for almost a year trying to get a visa to come to New Zealand. Teddy has still not met his young daughter.

McDowall said: “Why is my daughter coming up to nine months old and she’s never met her father when we’ve been in a loving and committed relationship for nearly six years? ... Our family matters, his life matters, black fathers matter, and we should be allowed to be a family together and also here in New Zealand during this worldwide upheaval of a pandemic.”

Maz told the WSWS the anti-immigrant rhetoric in New Zealand, with an election coming up in September, “reminds me so much of the conversations around Brexit: ‘we don’t want foreigners,’ ‘jobs are for New Zealanders.’ That’s really interesting as an outsider, because I know New Zealanders are hospitable people.”

She continued: “I do think the border is being used to

fight the election, as opposed to schools, education, public services... So then you have these thousands of people, myself included, who are being used as pawns.”

Maz criticised the media’s focus on the Ardern government’s supposed “kindness and compassion,” saying: “The way migrants have been treated is shocking. It’s a scandal, and the worldwide media hasn’t picked up on it, or are not aware of it.”

The Labour Party-led coalition includes the Green Party and the New Zealand First Party, a right-wing nationalist party which largely sets the agenda on foreign policy and immigration. NZ First is campaigning to slash immigration to just 15,000 people a year, compared with more than 50,000 last year. The party is receiving campaign advice from British businessman Arron Banks and his associate Andy Wigmore who both played a major role in advising and funding the far-right UK Independence Party’s campaign to leave the European Union.

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