



"We are on a pathway to becoming the Middle East where they bring in hordes and hordes of temporary workers with very little rights and when they're done with them they throw them out to bring another lot in," says Migrant Workers Association spokeswoman Anu Kaloti. Photo: Lynn Grieveson



### **Dileepa Fonseka**

Dileepa Fonseka is a political reporter based in Wellington who covers housing, infrastructure, immigration, transport, local government and the Provincial Growth Fund.

#### **IMMIGRATION**

# Migration policy 'on a pathway to Dubai'

***Temporary workers feel abused and misled by a migration system that often forces them to work for below the minimum wage and sleep on mattresses six-to-a-room. Dileepa Fonseka reports on how NZ Inc became the 'Dubai of the South Pacific.'***

For Gagandeep Singh\*, last week's announcement by Immigration New Zealand doesn't mean much.

He was finally granted New Zealand residency last week. He lodged his residency application in May 2018, a wait of nearly two years.

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"My mother-in-law came here when my daughter was born and she took her back to India because at that time it was another cost of \$2000 for a lawyer [to apply for a longer visa for his daughter] and still people are struggling for eight or nine months for visa approval."

This week INZ told thousands of migrants that since the middle of 2018 the department had only processed "priority" residency applications where people earned over \$106,080 a year, \$51 an hour, were registered in certain occupations, or worked for an accredited employer.

Migrant Workers Association spokeswoman Anu Kaloti said the revelation was another blow to people on work visas sitting in the queue, or seeking to enter it, who did not come to New Zealand aspiring to be the kind of temporary workers seen in places like Dubai.

"They really need to do something for those people otherwise we are on a pathway to becoming the Middle East where they bring in hordes and hordes of temporary workers with very little rights and when they're done with them they throw them out to bring another lot in," Kaloti said.



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Inflatable beds like this were taken out at night to allow six people to sleep to a room at one Te Puke home, Singh said. Photo: Supplied.

“We seem to be heading that way and it would be very disastrous, not only for those temporary workers, but also for Kiwi workers, because it lowers the work conditions and wages and salaries for all of us and not just the temporary workers who come in from other countries.”

A **report** from the Maxim Institute authored by Julian Wood and released last week said New Zealand was in danger of creating a “two-tier” labour market after a six-fold increase in the country’s temporary workforce since the 1990s.

Wood used publicly available figures to show New Zealand now had a temporary workforce of 170,000 people, a sharp rise from the 30,000-strong temporary workforce the country had during the 1990s.

Few of those people have any shot at being granted residency rights here.

In 2008 there were a potential 125,000 applicants on work and student visas for 47,000 residency visas: a ratio of 2.65 to one. At the end of last year that ratio sat at 7.84 to one after a greater number of temporary visas were issued at the same time as the target number of residency visas was reduced.

Rather than ratcheting up the number of points required for residency, which would **require a Cabinet vote**, INZ processed "priority" skill migrant applications and left others on hold, which in turn led to the large backlog of applications shown in this graph:

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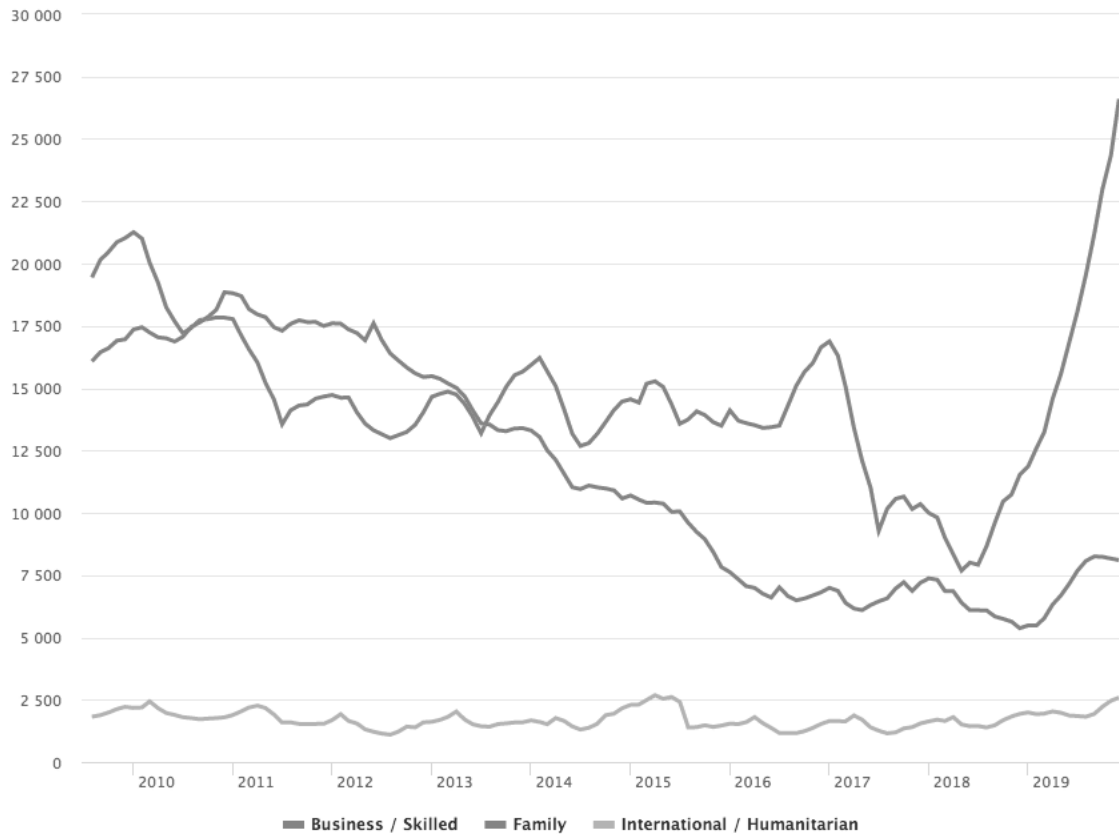
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The Maxim report proposed the number of work visas issued be frozen, and then gradually phased out to wean New Zealand businesses off low wage temporary visa workers.

“Instead we would support a shift toward better long-term work migration solutions for low skill workers who would wish to live here permanently,” Wood wrote in the report.

“We should not be satisfied with a vision of migration that reduces people to economic units that are imported simply to maximise the welfare of New Zealand Inc,” he said.

“The reality is that we are in danger of creating a two-tier labour market and society whereby some, especially low-skilled migrants, are seen simply as labour supply to be discarded should we meet economic headwinds or should they get sick.”

#### 'In India those days there were lots of advertisements'

Singh's experience was a far cry from how New Zealand Inc first pitched the experience to him through offshore education agents in 2012.

"In India in those days there was lots of advertisements that all you've got to do is one year's study, once you've finished your one year study you will get your residence," Singh said.

Kaloti said the families of students often got into debt on the back of those promises and scraped together the money for the single year of study that would be their gateway to residency here.

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**"There were several comments made about mattresses in the back of shops and that was where the workers would be, that's where they would be sleeping."**

Singh said he was surprised when he got to New Zealand and found out what the living and employment conditions for people like himself were.

"I used to work 15 or 16 hours at Dominos and at that time we used to live eight or nine people in a two-bedroom unit," Singh said.

He was not alone in having that experience.

Kaloti said most students would spend an average of three years living ten people to a three-bedroom house as they sought to cut back on expenses.

Some migrants worked full-time hours below minimum wage on a total salary of \$300-\$400 a week to pay debt back.

On paper they would be recorded as having worked 20 hours at minimum wage, but in practice some have worked up to 95 hours a week according to a 2016 report on temporary migrant worker exploitation.

### **What migrant abuse looks like**

One part of their wages might be paid out in cash to keep the extra hours off the books and not violate their conditions of study, or they might have to work full-time hours on a part-time salary.

For that money a migrant could afford to live in a "typical" three-bedroom house for temporary migrants, Kaloti said.

"There'll be beds in the living room...maybe a sofa bed or a day bed, so there'll be a couple of people at least sleeping in the living room," she said.

"And then in the bedroom you'll have beds and then mattresses on the floor, and then people also sleeping in the garage, so that would be your typical scenario."

Kaloti said "hot-bedding" was also common where migrants who worked the day shift would sleep then swap out for migrants who worked the night shift.

They often rented houses where the landlord had taken "shortcuts" with healthy home standards, which meant he or she was unlikely to conduct an inspection and spot the overcrowding, she said. Each person paid between \$50 and \$80 in rent.

**"I talked to workers in the South Island...that were put in accommodation that had no heating and they would rely on the oven to heat the accommodation."**

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Friends of his living in Te Puke, Western Bay of Plenty, currently dragged inflatable mattresses out from behind couches every night and slept six-to-a-room, he said.

"Te Puke is pretty bad when we see the accommodation for the non-residents and the temporary visa holders," Singh said.

### 'Mattresses in shops'

Christina Stringer, associate professor at the University of Auckland who did research into temporary migrants in 2016 and a report on migrant exploitation for MBIE in 2019, said the descriptions chimed with what she discovered during her research in 2016. She also added another scenario that she had heard about more than once:

"There were several comments made about mattresses in the back of shops and that was where the workers would be, that's where they would be sleeping," Stringer said.

"I was horrified."

Stringer's research, **submitted to MBIE in 2019**, was part of the **coalition agreement** between Labour and NZ First to take "serious action" on migrant exploitation.

She couldn't comment publicly about that report but could speak about her **earlier research in 2016 on temporary migrant workers** for a number of different anti-human trafficking NGOs, which recommended the introduction of a modern slavery act.

"In that report for the NGOs I talked to workers in the South Island...that were put in accommodation that had no heating and they would rely on the oven to heat the accommodation," Stringer said.

"That type of situation I don't think is acceptable," she said.

Stringer said the problems extended far beyond Auckland.

"In terms of the overcrowded accommodation we're talking horticulture, and so more out in the rural areas...and in the cities of course we're also talking about it because of the high rents here in Auckland."

### 'Promises made and not kept'

Stringer said migrants had been promised residency by a lot of players within the immigration supply chain, including by recruitment agents, education agents and employers.

"Without question there are businesses and industries that are reliant on temporary migrant workers," she said.

**"... the New Zealand Government is dishonest because it creates and promotes immigration opportunities, particularly associated with international education, that are actually very hard to achieve."**

Stringer's report "Temporary migrant exploitation in New Zealand", that was submitted to MBIE last year, and co-authored with Francis Collins of the University of Waikato, noted the feeling of deception many migrants felt between the way the dream was sold in their home countries and the reality.

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"Our research suggests that, from the perspective of both migrants and stakeholders, this pathway to residency has been sold to prospective students by agents, education providers and the New Zealand government."

One migrant questioned during Stringer's 2019 research described almost every party within New Zealand's immigration system as dishonest:

"Employers are dishonest in terms of the conditions they offer and the support they provide to employees; employees are dishonest about their skills and abilities as well as their intention to remain in New Zealand; and the New Zealand Government is dishonest because it creates and promotes immigration opportunities, particularly associated with international education, that are actually very hard to achieve," the report said.

### **'Endless' immigration issues**

The coalition Government is divided on the issue of the New Zealand Residence Programme (NZRP) planning range, a target number of residencies that was due to be set at the end of last year.

Immigration Minister Iain Lees-Galloway has indicated he wants different planning ranges for different visa categories so skilled migrants aren't the first category to be cut-off when the pressure goes on to cut immigration numbers.

NZ First has made noises about population policy, but has declined to provide specifics.

The Greens have criticised the planning range as "arbitrary" and spokeswoman Golriz Ghahraman earlier told Newsroom they'd made that view clear to Lees-Galloway.

National hasn't released its ideal residency planning range number either, but ACT, National's likely coalition partner if they're elected, hold views similar to the Greens on the NZRP.

### **'I don't have a problem with the numbers'**

ACT leader David Seymour also dismissed the idea of assigning an "arbitrary cap" to the number of residencies New Zealand should grant.

"Nobody knows what the correct population is for New Zealand. In order to know that you have to know what the shape of the economy is going to be in 20 years time and what sort of technology we're going to have," Seymour said.

"I don't have a problem with the numbers. I have a problem with the speed of processing," he said.

"There's enormous frustration out there. Probably the number one reason people come and see me as an electorate MP is immigration. So it's families torn apart, it's people who can't get their friends or relatives to visit for a wedding, it's employers that just can't get staff, it's endless."

However, Seymour added the caveat that migrants should have to pledge that free speech was "imperative", sexuality was a private issue and that both genders were equal.

"I'm a big fan of what Steven Harper, the former Canadian Prime Minister, likes to say: ultimately people have to have a path to citizenship," he said.

"If you want people to come here and be good citizens and if you say to them 'look you'll never be one of us', don't expect them to be good citizens."

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"We've got a real problem in that the councils own two-thirds of the infrastructure, but they have 10 percent of the revenue, and one of the results of that is that they have an incentive not to build infrastructure," Seymour said.

"You've got to fix all of that stuff around funding and pricing of infrastructure, no question, but that's a separate issue," he said.

### 'Eight years of struggle'

Singh does not have to worry about that debate so much anymore.

He described his time in New Zealand as "eight years of struggle" but he now has two offers of residency in front of him.

His struggle included a fight with thyroid cancer in 2014, which he had to return to India for.

Singh said he would make a decision on whether he should stay in New Zealand or move to Canada after his second child was born.

"At the moment you can say there's a 60 percent chance I will go to Canada...at the moment my missus is pregnant and we're just waiting for the baby," Singh said.

"These guys took so long..it is too difficult."

*\*This individual has requested an alias be used for this story*

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