

Blog November 2024

Is New Zealand Falling Behind in Immigration Policy?

While other countries are reducing migrant intake and improving immigration programs to protect workers' rights and streamline processes, New Zealand appears to be taking a different approach—even as unemployment continues to rise.

In Canada, for example, immigration targets are set to decrease, with a 21% reduction planned for 2024, followed by further decreases in the subsequent years. Seasonal worker numbers will also see a significant drop, with Canada reducing from 800,000 to 450,000 seasonal positions in 2025. Globally, immigration policies are increasingly targeted to meet each country's specific economic needs rather than following an open-door approach. These changes ensure that essential roles are filled without creating surplus labour, which is particularly prudent given rising unemployment rates.

An additional shift in immigration management is occurring as more countries emphasise human rights protections for migrant workers, particularly the right to choice in employment and where they live. Employers in other countries with proven track records of fair employment practices and respect for workers' rights are benefiting from streamlined approval and monitoring processes, reflecting a shift toward efficiency and worker welfare in immigration management.

The notion that making the recruitment of migrant labour difficult and costly will control unnecessary migration and encourage good employment practices has repeatedly proven ineffective. Leading food-exporting nations rely heavily on migrant and seasonal workers to maintain production levels and quality standards—a dependency unlikely to change in the near future. Given the global food security risks, agriculture and horticulture sectors require skilled labour at precise times for harvest and production processes. Without this labour force, significant amounts of produce will go to waste, which the world simply cannot afford.

Amid rising anti-immigrant sentiment in parts of the Northern Hemisphere, countries like Canada and the United States are adjusting policies around migrant labour. In Canada, this has driven reductions in migrant worker numbers, and in the United States, the presidential political campaign is targeting immigration reform, including the use of offshore seasonal workers.

In this evolving global landscape, New Zealand needs to determine its approach carefully and not fall further behind. A focus on essential labour for food production, along with accessible and streamlined processes, will be crucial to sustaining current levels of agricultural and horticultural output. Beyond filling labour gaps, New Zealand must prioritise protecting migrant workers' rights and ensure more efficient immigration processes. Addressing these three areas—targeted immigration, streamlined approvals, and enhanced worker protections—will help NZ stay competitive and socially responsible.

Rather than playing catch-up, New Zealand has an opportunity to take a proactive stance in response to global trends. By aligning immigration policy with the country's labour needs while protecting workers' rights and refining processes, New Zealand can build a sustainable, forward-looking immigration system. But there is much work ahead to achieve these goals.

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