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Working holidaymakers in Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Declining numbers of ‘working holidaymakers’ in Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand during the COVID-19 pandemic have produced a labour deficit in select industries. Those who have remained in both countries throughout the pandemic have experienced an increase in demand.

Theme

Mobile Livelihoods

Keywords

Gender, women, labour, mobility, pandemic, race, whiteness, au pair, domestic work, Australia, New Zealand

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Globally, mobility restrictions introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic have caused various complications for migrant workers: many have lost their livelihoods, or have been forced into exceptionally precarious working conditions.² At the same time, the pandemic has increased demand for certain types of work, and for migrant workers to carry them out.

This entry explores the experiences of working holidaymakers in Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand during COVID-19. It will examine working holidaymakers' shifting legal statuses and everyday experiences of labour during the pandemic. Together with the entry on international student workers, this piece suggests that the pandemic has underscored the salience of race in conditioning migrant workers' labour experiences.

Working holidaymakers in Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand

Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand are parties to bilateral agreements with multiple countries that have established their popular 'working holiday' programs. Under these schemes, young adults aged between 18 and 35, who are nationals of countries subject to these agreements,³ can have an extended holiday in Australia or Aotearoa-New Zealand for between 12 and 23 months, and may legally work to fund their expenses. Most of the participating countries are in Europe, with smaller numbers in Asia and the Americas: in 2018-19, the top five countries for first Working Holiday visa grants in Australia were the UK, France, Germany, South Korea, and Taiwan.⁴ The working holiday is therefore a predominately – though not exclusively – “intra-Western” mode of mobility.⁵ Many of these working holidaymakers therefore constitute a considerably ‘whiter’ pool than many other groups of migrant workers, and more easily assimilate into Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand's majority white-settler societies.

In both countries, several sectors — such as agriculture, childcare and tourism — are heavily reliant on the circular patterns of labour provided by these migrant workers.⁶ Certain industries are also highly gendered: au pairs, for example, are almost exclusively women.⁷ A minority of those working in typical working holidaymaker industries, including those individuals interviewed here, do not carry a current and valid working holiday visa, but either work irregularly on a visitor's visa, or have overstayed a visitor's or working holiday visa.⁸ A Migrant Workers Justice Initiative (MWJI) report on migrant au pairs in Australia found that while the overwhelming majority of their respondents carried working holiday visas, 2% worked irregularly while carrying a visitor's visa.⁹ This is consistent with the experiences of the respondents interviewed for this entry, Leslie and Jemima, who were working as au pairs in New Zealand on visitors' visas. Both women are eligible for working holiday visas, and at some stage, had intended to obtain them. They work within roles

² New Zealand Immigration. 2020. *Information about Supplementary Seasonal Employment Work Visa*. Available online at: <https://www.immigration.govt.nz/new-zealand-visas/apply-for-a-visa/about-visa/supplementary-seasonal-employment-sse-work-visa>. Last accessed 13 January 2021.

³ This includes the UK, Canada, Ireland and France.

⁴ Australian Government, Department of Home Affairs. 2019. *Working Holiday Maker visa program report*. Canberra: Department of Home Affairs.

⁵ Yoon, Kyong. 2014. The racialised mobility of transnational working holidays. *Identities* 21(5): 586-603.

⁶ Stayner, Tom. 2020. Fears of a 'labour crisis' as number of backpackers working in Australia plummets. *SBS News*. 8 August 2020. Available online at: <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/fears-of-a-labour-crisis-as-number-of-backpackers-working-in-australia-plummets>.

⁷ Berg, Laurie and Gabrielle Meagher. 2018. *Cultural Exchange or Cheap Housekeeper? Findings of a National Survey of Au Pairs in Australia*. Sydney: Migrant Worker Justice Initiative.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Berg and Meagher. 2018.

usually filled by working holidaymakers, and there is little that distinguishes them – other than their legal status – from those carrying working holidaymaker visas. This entry therefore employs an expansive definition of ‘working holidaymakers’, including those who hold current and valid working holiday visas, those who have overstayed a working holiday visa, and those who are eligible for a working holiday visa, but for whatever reason, do not currently carry one.

To stay or to go: mobility responses during the pandemic

Since the beginning of the pandemic, numbers of working holidaymakers in both Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand have dropped. In Australia, there were 141,000 working holidaymakers at the end of 2019, which dropped to 92,000 by May 2020.¹⁰ Still several thousand working holidaymakers have decided to stay in both countries throughout the pandemic. Their reasons for doing so are diverse.

Leslie, an 18-year-old American au pair, arrived in Aotearoa-New Zealand in March on a visitor’s visa, intending to apply for a working holiday visa to stay for 18 months. She says that she came to Aotearoa-New Zealand primarily to join her partner, and had also hoped to travel. Although the country’s Alert 4 level lockdown hit soon after her arrival, she never considered leaving New Zealand, both because she did not want to leave her partner, and because she did not want to return to the United States, where the federal government’s management of the pandemic — and the country’s broader political situation — had made life there lose its appeal. Meanwhile, Jemima, a 19-year-old British au pair, arrived in Aotearoa-New Zealand in January, with the intention of travelling until March. When her return flight to the United Kingdom was cancelled, she was unable to find any other flights. As she does not have children, and has no health conditions placing her at heightened risk of contracting COVID-19, she was considered a low priority for a UK government charter flight. She further explains that she also felt that there was little point in returning to the UK, as she lacked faith in the central government’s management of COVID-19, and decided to stay in Aotearoa-New Zealand as a working holidaymaker.

Both Leslie’s and Jemima’s narratives highlight a significant aspect of COVID-19’s trajectory in Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand: the region has far fewer cases than most other Western countries, including the US and the UK. Neither woman had much faith in their country of nationality’s approach to the pandemic, and understood that Aotearoa-New Zealand was likely safer for them. This sentiment has been elsewhere echoed on a larger scale: several signees to an online petition calling for extensions to Aotearoa-New Zealand’s working holidaymaking visas similarly recognise that their countries of nationality have become unsafe, and that it is better for them to stay in Aotearoa-New Zealand.¹¹ This group’s mobility response – to stay in Aotearoa-New Zealand, despite not carrying secure legal status there – is therefore influenced by their origin countries’ and host-country’s management of the pandemic.

¹⁰ Fitzsimmons, Caitlin. 2020. Take action now: call to open borders to au pairs. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 June 2020. Available online at: <https://www.smh.com.au/business/the-economy/take-action-now-call-to-open-borders-to-au-pairs-20200626-p556qx.html>. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

¹¹ Neal, Tracy and Karoline Tuckey. 2020. Foreigners stranded in NZ call for extension to visas. *Radio New Zealand*. 3 August 2020. Available online at: <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/422654/foreigners-stranded-in-nz-call-for-extension-to-visas>. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

Mobility restrictions and labour deficits

Meanwhile, restrictions on international mobility during the pandemic have also created a need for certain types of work, including those that were often filled by working holidaymakers before the pandemic. In March 2020, Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand closed their borders to all excepting citizens and permanent residents – working holidaymakers, who carry temporary visas, can therefore not enter the country.¹² While working holidaymakers may legally engage in most types of work, in both countries, they are often associated with certain sectors, including hospitality, tourism, agriculture, and childcare. The drop in the number of working holidaymakers following the onset of the pandemic has therefore prompted concerns about the survival of the tourism and farming sectors in both countries, which are reliant on migrant labour sourced through working holiday schemes.¹³ The decline in working holidaymakers has further prompted a deficit in au pairs, on whom many families are dependent for childcare.¹⁴ Many au pairs have returned to their countries of nationality, while new au pairs cannot enter either country.¹⁵ For Leslie and Jemima, however, the deficit in working holidaymakers made it easy for them to find work – despite carrying visitor’s visas, and not having the legal right to work in Aotearoa-New Zealand. For Leslie, who is employed as an au pair with a family in a small town on South Island, the deficit has also necessitated completing additional work on the family’s dairy farm, which is subject to a labour shortage due to the dearth of working holidaymakers.

Emergent legal categories

In Aotearoa-New Zealand, this deficit in labour has further prompted calls for extensions to current working holidaymakers’ visas. An online petition by German working holidaymaker Marie Louisa Bock, which requested a six-month extension to working holidaymakers’ visas, was signed by over 13,000 individuals.¹⁶ Bock reasoned that working holidaymakers could fill the country’s anticipated labour shortage in some industries—including horticulture, viticulture and animal husbandry—and that their presence in the country provided more purchasing power to support Aotearoa-New Zealand’s businesses.¹⁷ Later in the year, Aotearoa-New Zealand’s government announced that working holidaymakers whose visas expire between 1 November 2020 and 31 March 2021 would be automatically granted an Supplementary Seasonal Employment (SSE) visa, to conduct seasonal work in the horticulture or viticulture industries.¹⁸ The labour deficit created by the international mobility restrictions introduced during the pandemic has therefore led to the development of new legal categories intended to fill this shortage.

¹² There is some evidence on Facebook groups of some working holidaymakers being able to enter under both countries’ travel exemption systems

¹³ Stayner 2020.

¹⁴ Berg and Meagher 2018.

¹⁵ Anderson, Ryan. 2020. Coronavirus: Parents struggle as hundreds of au pairs leave NZ. *Stuff*. 26 August 2020. Available online at: <https://www.stuff.co.nz/life-style/parenting/122539891/coronavirus-parents-struggle-as-hundreds-of-au-pairs-leave-nz>. Last accessed 22 December 2020; Fitzsimmons 2020.

¹⁶ Bock, Marie Louisa. 2020. *Petition of Marie Louisa Bock: Working Holiday Visa extension*. Wellington: New Zealand Parliament. Available online at: https://www.parliament.nz/en/pb/petitions/document/PET_99443/petition-of-marie-louisa-bock-working-holiday-visa-extension. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ New Zealand Immigration. Information about Supplementary Seasonal Employment Work Visa. Available online at: <https://www.immigration.govt.nz/new-zealand-visas/apply-for-a-visa/about-visa/supplementary-seasonal-employment-sse-work-visa>. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

Everyday labour experiences

Meanwhile, the everyday labour experiences of au pairs in Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand reflect the countries' childcare labour deficit, and the au pair industry's gendered, domestic character. Globally, commentators have expressed concerns regarding the welfare of domestic workers during the pandemic, whose spatial confinement at home during lockdown might lead to increased labour exploitation.¹⁹ Domestic work, including au pairing, is also a highly feminised field, and women are vulnerable to specific forms of harm, including sexual violence. MWJI finds that even under normal circumstances, a substantial minority of their respondents have experienced coercive and exploitative behaviour while au pairing in Australia.²⁰ These women have reported experiences such as feeling compelled to work more than they expected, feeling compelled to work different tasks than they expected, non-payment of money promised, verbal abuse and sexual harm.²¹

Still, Leslie and Jemima did not report any maltreatment by their host families. Leslie explains that the families she has worked for "have been awesome and have treated [her] really well."²² Despite her insecure legal status, she has secured employment, and has not experienced any harm. Similarly, Jemima reports that she has not experienced any issues with the families she has worked with. Although she understands that she is working irregularly, she has friends in Aotearoa-New Zealand, whom she met while backpacking, and is sure that if she were mistreated, she would be able to leave her job and stay with them. Due to these social networks, Jemima feels a sense of security in Aotearoa-New Zealand, irrespective of her vulnerable position in the labour market. Still, she notes that her first au pair job was "intense," as she was tasked with caring for three small children, one of whom had special needs, on her own.²³

While she felt that she was treated well and fairly paid, she reiterates that it was a difficult job, as she was expected to work regular hours according to a weekly roster. As previously highlighted, Leslie is also expected to work on the family's dairy farm, in addition to her domestic duties. While these women have experienced satisfactory working conditions, their employers' expectations have grown due to the countrywide deficit in labour usually fulfilled by working holidaymakers.

¹⁹ Dattani Kavita. 2020. Rethinking Social Reproduction in the Time of Covid-19. *Antipode*. Available online at: <https://antipodeonline.org/2020/04/15/rethinking-social-reproduction-in-the-time-of-covid-19/>. Last accessed 7 July 2021.

²⁰ Berg and Meagher 2020.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Author's interview notes.

²³ Author's interview notes.