

11 October 2022

Prime Minister, the Rt Hon Jacinda Ardern
Office of Parliament
Level 9 Beehive Building
Wellington 6011

Dear Prime Minister,

RE: Pacific Island Employment Initiatives

Over the past 24 months the EMA has actively engaged in initiatives to try and increase workforce participation in New Zealand for members of the Pacific Island community, both to increase employment and to potentially increase wages for those workers.

These initiatives include:

- Working with Minister Faafoi and Immigration NZ to provide a path for temporary visa holders to permanent residency.
- Participating in and supporting the Pacific Pay Gap Inquiry with the Human Rights Commission, including my own participation as a member of the Reference Group, and engaging businesses in the consultation process.
- Reopening the Pacific Island access visas and additional RSE workers.
- Co-leading the Advanced Manufacturing Industry Transformation Plan with the CTU and MBIE, including a focus on developing the Pacific workforce.
- Developing options with MSD for training and pastoral care for Pacific Islanders in the workforce, encouraging greater participation.
- Public and private advocacy for amnesty for the estimated 14,000 – 16,000 people classified as overstayers, prioritising Pacific Islanders which we understand to be the largest group, that are currently in New Zealand.

I am writing to you regarding progressing the amnesty for overstayers which we believe is the next important initiative, and which we unequivocally support. We see the amnesty, particularly addressing Pacific Islanders as the first priority, as an opportunity to engage this cohort into formal employment, working with ImmigrationNZ and MSD.

This is at a time when there are significant employment opportunities, including in high demand sectors like manufacturing, where there is already a strong representation of Pacific Island workers. We think these employment opportunities for overstayers can be converted quickly, with consequent benefits to these individuals, their families, and their communities.

The Pacific Pay Gap Inquiry work has highlighted the issue of overstayers as a significant contributor to income inequality in Pacific Island communities. The lack of a visa for one or both adults in a household encourages those people to participate in grey or black areas of the economy, opening them up to exploitation and leaving generations of the same family in vulnerable positions.

Whole families avoid participating in, or being identified by, our health and education systems while promotion and other working opportunities are often rejected as overstayers prefer not to draw attention to themselves.

An amnesty would encourage those affected to join the workforce at a time of transformation for several of our sectors, including manufacturing and construction, and benefit from the skills and opportunities this transformation will provide.

Finally, the EMA is currently working with MSD on a programme to assist those on the Jobseeker benefit to re-engage and participate in the workforce. While our role is to work with the employers bringing Jobseeker beneficiaries into their workplace, we could equally assist new New Zealanders back into the workplace as part of that programme – if they were to be granted residency status.

Many employers are desperately short of staff and would welcome a fresh, willing, and able cohort of workers into the job market. They will be willing to work with these people in new ways to get them integrated into the workplace.

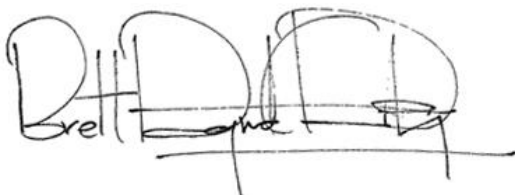
As an example, we recently worked with one of our EMA directors Saia Mata'ele to bring in a group of workers to solve a people shortage for one of our manufacturers seeking 20 or so new staff. Working with a church group we were able to bring a single group from that church, who all wanted to work together, into the workplace to the obvious benefit for our member but also to the benefit of that wider church community through new jobs at a good wage level.

I know officials are wary of granting amnesty to a specific group ahead of another group of nationals but New Zealand's ties to Pacific communities run deep. At a time of some instability in the Pacific region, prioritising in the first instance an amnesty to this group of overstayers in my view would go some way to further strengthening those ties and send a very powerful signal. The amnesty would also finally put to bed the last part of the shameful "dawn raid" legacy, which the Government's apology certainly helped address, and remove the last part of the stigma that this has created for the Pacific Island community.

The EMA would be willing to work with the Minister and Immigration NZ in any way we can to help make this happen including public support and advocacy throughout the business community.

I look forward to your response and support for this important initiative.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Brett O'Riley". The signature is stylized and written over a horizontal line.

Brett O'Riley
Chief Executive
Employers and Manufacturers Association