

**Migrant labour exploitation in New Zealand: a critical analysis of the political discourse**

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**Dissertation submitted to**

**Auckland University of Technology**

**in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of**

**Master of Business (Management)**

**2025**

## Contents

List of Figures .....	5
List of Tables .....	5
Attestation of Authorship.....	6
Acknowledgements.....	7
Abstract.....	8
List of Abbreviations .....	9
1. Chapter 1: Introduction .....	10
1.1. Background.....	10
1.2. Research Questions.....	15
1.3. Structure of the Thesis .....	17
2. Chapter 2: Literature Review .....	18
2.1. New Zealand’s Need for Seasonal Migrant Labour.....	18
2.2. Visa Categories and Schemes .....	20
2.3. The Registered Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme .....	0
2.3.1. Key Features .....	0
2.3.2. Development over time.....	0
2.4. Accredited Employer Work Visa.....	1
2.4.1. Key Features .....	1
2.4.2. Differences between AEWV and RSE.....	2
2.4.3. Development over time.....	2
2.5. Forms of Migrant Labour Exploitation.....	3
2.5.1. Payments to Labour Recruiters .....	3
2.5.2. Contract Falsification.....	4
2.5.3. Wage Theft.....	5
2.5.4. Long Working Hours .....	5
2.5.5. Health and Safety.....	6
2.6. Drivers of Migrant Labour Exploitation .....	7
2.6.1. Labour Market Deregulation.....	7
2.6.2. Employer-Assisted Visa.....	8
2.6.3. Deportation .....	9

2.6.4.	Inability to Access Work.....	9
2.6.5.	Law Enforcement.....	10
2.6.6.	Funding Constraints.....	11
2.7.	Union Views .....	11
2.8	Conclusion.....	11
3.	Chapter 3: Methodology .....	13
3.3.	Introduction.....	13
3.4.	Research Philosophy.....	14
3.5.	Research Approach.....	14
3.6.	The Importance of Framing Political Debates .....	14
3.7.	Research Design.....	15
3.8.	Data Collection .....	16
3.8.1.	Parliamentary Debates (Hansard) .....	17
3.8.2.	Political Party Websites and Election Manifestos .....	17
3.8.3.	Press Releases by Relevant MPs.....	18
3.8.4.	Interviews or Reportage in Media Articles .....	18
3.9.	Data Analysis.....	18
3.9.1.	Data Familiarisation.....	19
3.9.2.	Coding the Data .....	20
3.9.3.	Constructing Themes .....	20
3.9.4.	Review of Themes .....	20
3.9.5.	Themes Definition.....	21
3.9.6.	Producing Findings .....	21
4.	Chapter 4: Findings.....	22
4.3.	Context.....	22
4.4.	Theme 1: SML as Necessary for Economic Growth .....	26
4.4.1.	SML as an Important Contributor to Export Earnings.....	26
4.4.2.	SML Supports Economic-Recovery .....	28
4.5.	Theme 2: SML as Necessary to Meet Industry Needs.....	29
4.5.1.	Industry Needs as Key Driver of Policy .....	30
4.5.2.	SML is Necessary to Meet Industry Needs.....	31
4.6.	Theme 3: SML and Benefits to Workers, their Families and Countries.....	33

4.6.1.	Development and Remittance Benefits.....	33
4.6.2.	Skill Transfer and Social Capital .....	35
4.6.3.	Strategic Pacific Partnerships.....	35
4.7.	Theme 4: SML as a Barrier to New Zealand Workers.....	36
4.7.1.	Balancing SML with Jobs for New Zealanders .....	37
4.7.2.	Training Local Workers .....	37
4.8.	Theme 5: SML as a Site of Exploitation.....	38
4.8.1.	Restricted Mobility & Power Imbalance.....	39
4.8.2.	Poor Living & Working Conditions.....	40
4.8.3.	Countervailing Critiques – Cheap Labour and Coercion.....	41
4.8.4.	Political Debate over the Extent of Exploitation.....	42
4.9.	Summary .....	43
5.	Chapter 5: Discussion .....	45
5.1.	Representation of SML as an Issue in the Political Domain.....	45
5.1.1.	National Party – Economic Managerialism .....	46
5.1.2.	Labour Party – A “Balanced” Middle Approach .....	46
5.1.3.	The Green Party – Humanitarian Approach.....	47
5.1.4.	The ACT Party – Liberal-Market Price-Signals .....	48
5.1.5.	New Zealand First – Putting SML Second .....	48
5.1.6.	Cross-Party Patterns and Points of Difference.....	49
5.2.	Key Themes in New Zealand Political Discourse.....	50
5.2.1.	Economic Necessity.....	51
5.2.2.	Industry Demands .....	51
5.2.3.	Benefits for All.....	52
5.2.4.	Locals First.....	52
5.2.5.	SML Exploitation – Commodification.....	53
5.2.6.	How do these narratives constrain immigration policy?.....	53
5.3.	Legitimising SML Exploitation .....	55
5.4.	Why are SML unable to resist exploitation?.....	55
5.5.	Enforcement and Funding Constraints.....	56
6.	Chapter 6 – Conclusion.....	57
6.1.	Strengths and Limitations .....	58

References..... 59

## **List of Figures**

Figure 1.1: Wage comparison among employee groups	10
Figure 1.2: Visa trends	15
Figure 3.1: Thematic analysis steps	40

## **List of Tables**

Table 2.1: Why New Zealanders see seasonal jobs less attractive	19
Table 3.1: Keywords and search strings	37
Table 3.2: Inclusion and exclusion criteria	38
Table 3.3: Data sources	39
Table 4.1: Themes and codes descriptors	45
Table 5.1: How parties present the SML issue?	70
Table 5.2: Different political parties narratives	75

### **Attestation of Authorship**

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

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## **Acknowledgements**

I want to thank the people who have helped me throughout my postgraduate journey, from setting up in New Zealand to completing this thesis. Without their support, guidance, and motivation, I would not be where I am. Very sincere thanks to Dr Peter Skilling, who guided and supported me in the entire thesis journey from proposal to compilation. His immense knowledge and support proved to be extremely helpful. I believe that it would be really difficult for me to complete this thesis without Dr. Skilling, so I would like to pay high acknowledgement to his magnanimity.

I also want to thank my family, including my siblings and parents, who supported and motivated me for post-graduation. Without their moral and financial support, I would not be able to complete this programme.

Finally, I want to thank my cousin Guneet Kaur, who helped me in setting up New Zealand and mentored me throughout. When I felt homesick after arriving in New Zealand, Guneet helped me to overcome it. Thank you to everyone for your love and support.

## Abstract

Migrant labour exploitation often occurs in countries where there are significant numbers of seasonal migrant labour (SML) workers. A significant share of New Zealand's workforce is made up of SML and due to this extensive reliance on imported labour, cases of SML exploitation are common. Earlier studies have documented both the occurrence of SML exploitation and its drivers, such as employer-bounded visas, high recruitment fees, and weak enforcement (Bi, 2016; Collins & Stringer, 2019; Stringer & Michailova, 2019). However, how politicians frame exploitation and how this framing influences the policies that facilitate or control exploitation have received limited attention. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine how politicians represent the issue of SML and the main themes in the New Zealand political domain related to SML exploitation. In this sense, narratives are not just rhetoric, they are policy-making tools that raise a problem, legitimise some solutions, and “rule out” other options.

Politicians – ministers and party leaders – define the rules of migrant labour schemes. Looking at the narratives of politicians about SML shows not only their plan for migrants but how they frame the problem, how they portray stories, and what policies politicians will use to respond exploitation. Using a qualitative research design, secondary data were collected using press releases, Hansard debates, newspapers, and websites of political parties. Data were analysed using thematic analysis.

Findings show that politicians – notably those from New Zealand's two major parties – present narratives in support of continued and increased SML for the New Zealand economy because it helps achieve export targets, industry production demands and benefits for Pacific workers. However, SML impacts local labour and is linked with exploitation by employers. Thus, SML is presented as both beneficial and fraught. Because the beneficial aspect lifts the broader New Zealand economy, successive governments remain reactive – reforms are done when scandals emerge or due to media pressure – to correct compliances instead of addressing migrant exploitation at a structural level.

**Key Words** – Seasonal migrant labour (SML), exploitation, New Zealand, economic, political narratives, precarious.

## **List of Abbreviations**

MBIE = Ministry of Business Innovation & Employment

HNZ = Horticulture New Zealand

CoA = Commonwealth of Australia

INZ = Immigration New Zealand

FLEX = Focus on Labour Exploitation

NZPC = New Zealand Productivity Commission

EY = Ernst & Young New Zealand

CAB = Citizens Advice Bureau

NZP = New Zealand Parliament

MoFAT = Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade

DoL = Department of Labour

MPI = Ministry of Primary Industries

NZHR = New Zealand Human Rights

ENZ = Employment New Zealand

NZCTU = New Zealand Council of Trade Unions

NZFAT = New Zealand Foreign Affairs & Trade

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1. Background

New Zealand relies on temporary migrants to fill jobs in low-wage occupations, notably in the horticulture and viticulture industries. They are low-paid jobs because most workers working in farms or fields are classified as “labourers” who receive low wages (just above the national minimum wage) compared to other employee groups (refer to Figure 1.1). For example, migrant workers arriving in New Zealand via the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme earn 10% above the minimum New Zealand wage (MBIE, 2023). Despite contributing \$7.48 billion to New Zealand’s exports in 2023/24 (HNZ, 2025), these employees still face precarious working conditions. Besides low wages, various types of exploitation have been reported in the literature, including dishonest recruitment practices, wage underpayment, excessive working hours, and cash payments (Stringer, 2016; Bi, 2016; Yuan et al., 2014). Existing studies show that a range of exploitative employment practices occur, ranging from non-compliance with fundamental employment standards to severe cases of forced labour and contemporary labour slavery.



Figure 1.1 Wage comparison among employee groups (FigureNZ, 2025)

A temporary or provisional migrant worker under *Immigration Act 2009* Section 351(8) is defined as an individual:

- a. Who the employer knows holds a temporary entry class visa; or
- b. Who holds a temporary entry class visa and in respect of whom the employer is reckless as to whether or not the person holds a temporary entry class visa

The literature argues that seasonal migrant workers (SML) who are also temporary workers are more exploited compared to permanent residents (Bi, 2016; Collins & Stringer, 2022; Yuan et al., 2014). For this thesis, exploitation is defined as a situation in which an individual (usually an employer but not always) takes unfair advantage of a worker by not complying with employment standards and relevant legislation, such as employment, work health and safety, immigration, or tax (Stringer & Michailova, 2019). However, SML are not always exploited by their immediate employer. For example, they are sometimes exploited by the intermediary who makes arrangements for workers to work in a foreign country (Stringer, 2016). Specifically, in New Zealand legislation, the exploitation of workers is stated in the *Immigration Act 2009* (Section 351) as a lack of compliance with the *Minimum Wage Act 1983*, the *Holidays Act 2003*, and the *Wages Protection Act 1983*. The *Immigration Act 2009* Section 351 (1a) defined exploitation as:

- i. Serious failure to pay to the employee or worker money payable under the *Holidays Act 2003*; or
- ii. Serious default under the *Minimum Wage Act 1983* in respect of the employee or worker; or
- iii. Responsible for a serious contravention of the *Wages Protection Act 1983* in respect of the employee or worker; or

Section 351 (1b) of the *Immigration Act 2009* further defines exploitation as the intent to prevent or hinder the worker from:

- i. Leaving the employer's service; or
- ii. Leaving New Zealand; or
- iii. Ascertaining or seeking his or her entitlements under the law of New Zealand; or
- iv. Disclosing to any person the circumstances of his or her work for the employer.

Lack of compliance of an employer with the relevant legislation, such as not granting minimum entitlement to employees, is not an isolated act. Employers who are not compliant with employment legislation and regulations are also sometimes engaged in illegal acts including tax evasion (Yuan et al., 2014), sham contracting (Sims, 2014), or phoenix activities<sup>1</sup> (Anderson H. , 2016). Employers' non-compliance and other non-compliant behaviours are not only evident in New Zealand, but they are also identified in Australia (CoA, 2019).

Various structural forces also enable exploitation (Allain et al., 2013). Most temporary migrant workers, notably those who are employed in labour-intensive industries, such as horticulture, arrive in New Zealand via employer-assisted visas, which link a worker to a specific employer. This restricts the capacity of employees to leave an exploitative situation, or to raise concerns. Faraday (2016) stresses that the employer-assisted system develops the conditions that lead to employee exploitation. In other comparable jurisdictions like Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom, structural gaps – both in the visa design and reactive way to enforce labour standards – develop the conditions that facilitate exploitation. For example, Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Programme audits a limited number of workplaces annually (Vosko et al., 2019). In the United States, H-2A and H-2B programmes impose fines and debarments for breaches, but low funding limits their deterrent effect relative to employer gains from low-wage labour, similar to enforcement challenges in New Zealand's RSE scheme (Woodmansee, 2023). Additionally, in the United Kingdom, licensing emphasizes compliance with immigration rules instead of labour conditions (UK, 2023). Thus, structural gaps or structural loopholes in this thesis refer to weaknesses in the regulation, policy, and law enforcement that expose vulnerable employees to exploitation. The structural gaps or loopholes can include but are not limited to:

- Employer-assisted visa scheme that prevent workers from changing employer, discouraging them to speak against exploitation (Collins F. L., In demand but disempowered: why low-skilled migrant workers face even worse exploitation under NZ's new rules, 2024).

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<sup>1</sup> According to MBIE (2019) Phoenix activities are defined as an intentional act in which the owners or directors of an insolvent firm transfer its assets, such as contracts, plant, machinery and equipment, and intangible assets to another phoenix entity. The former or original firm then has limited ability to pay outstanding debts, employee entitlements and tax obligations. This act not only allows firm to evade tax but also employee wages and entitlements. However, all this is done illegally.

- Enforcement gaps, caused by under-resourcing (for example, only 72 inspectors in 2020/21) and increasing case complexity, lowered investigation rates (10% in 2021/22), escalating issues like wage theft to exist (Xia, 2022; MBIE, 2024).

For example, Allain et al. (2013) critically evaluate the immigration policies of the United Kingdom and highlighted that structural loopholes are created by linking migrant workers with a particular employer. Other wider structural problems that increase the likelihood of migrant labour exploitation include immigrant status, inequality in the labour market, and limited mobility of the labour resulting from the government's lenient toward employers (Allain et al., 2013). Migrants' characteristics, including low English ability, different culture, and limited socialisation, make exploitation more likely.

Further, there are specific business models that pave the way for employee exploitation. Labour-intensive industries, particularly horticulture and viticulture, which are also characterised as low-wage jobs, are the major platform for exploitation (Curtain et al., 2018). The labour supply in these industries and the existence of “umbrella firms”<sup>2</sup> increase the likelihood of exploitation as workers in these industries have limited control over their work (Howe, 2019). Some businesses hire workers through contracting arrangements in which limited monitoring allows employers to exploit workers (Stringer, 2016).

New Zealand industries, including agriculture, construction, and telecommunications, have long depended on migrant labour. Temporary workers often gain employment in industries that experience a significant labour shortage. For example, in the 1800s, external labour was sought from Britain to New Zealand for the mineral and agriculture sectors (Phillips, 2015). Likewise, in the 1900s, construction and manufacturing industries relied on migrant labour from Europe and Pacific Island countries (MBIE, 2018a). More recently, migrant labour via the RSE scheme has been used for the horticulture and viticulture industries (INZ, 2025a). Temporary workers are often recruited in sectors that struggle to attract New Zealanders due to uncompetitive wages and poor conditions – showing that these labour shortages is the result of industry practices.

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<sup>2</sup> Umbrella firms mean third-parties that exist between workers and end-organisations. In this arrangement, the worker signs a contract with the umbrella firm instead of the employer. The umbrella firms receive the wages on behalf of workers and deduct fees, taxes, and other contributions, before paying the worker net wages (Stringer & Michailova, 2019). This undermines the transparency of the actual pay rate and unnecessary deductions, leading to workers exploitation in terms of wages and entitlements.

Undeniably, temporary labour, in many respects, has become an essential feature of the New Zealand labour market and the overall economy.

In New Zealand, temporary migrant workers are categorised based on the visa type that is assigned to them according to their work experience. These visa categories include international students and the working holiday scheme, among others. This thesis will mainly focus on the RSE and AEWV (Accredited Employer Work Visa) scheme due to the significant exploitation of migrant labour reports in the recent times (Scoop, 2017; NZLS, 2017; Scoop, 2018).

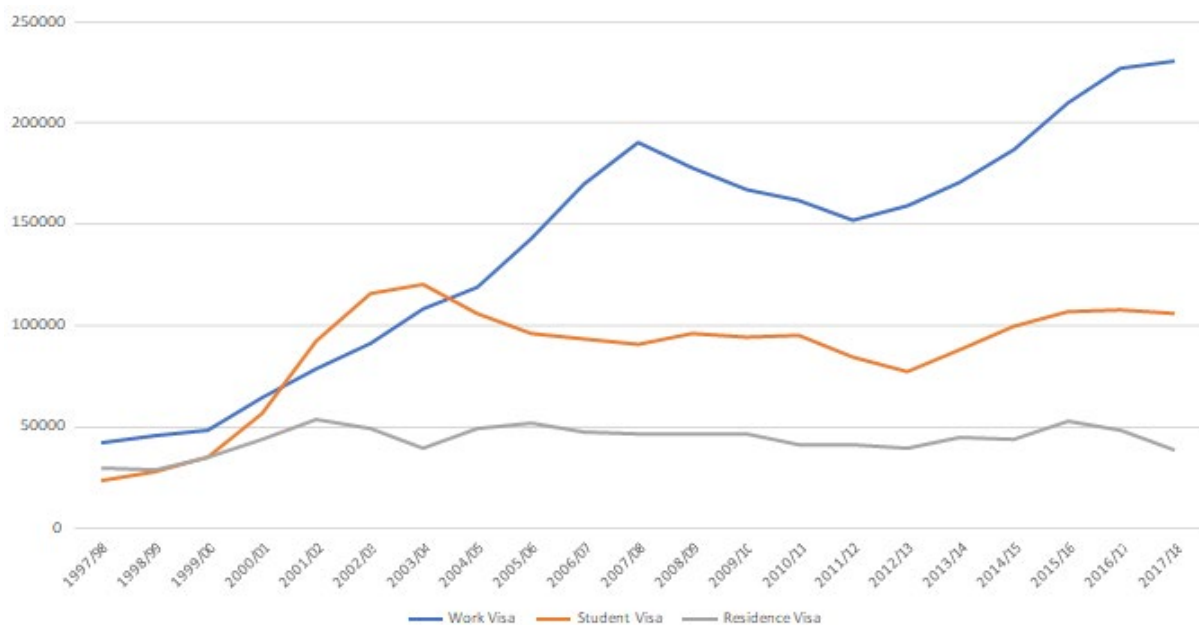
Temporary visa schemes including RSE and AEWV in New Zealand differ in their purpose, eligibility, duration and features. The RSE scheme is a short-term scheme (typically 7 months) that offers seasonal employment to horticulture and viticulture industries to 13 Pacific nations. The employer is responsible to provide pastoral care and minimum wages along with 10% to experienced returning employees. The scheme ties employee to employer constraining their mobility in the labour market and increasing dependency. By contrast, AEWV is a replacement of the Essential Skills visa that offers labour supply to wider industries, such as construction and hospitality. Unlike the RSE scheme, which targets Pacific nations, AEWV is open to all nationalities, needs employer accreditation and labour market tests, has a skill threshold (such as 2 years of experience and Level 4 qualification), and insists on a median wage. Visa duration also varies, such as 5 years for skilled and 3 years for lower skilled. However, it also ties workers with employers' increases dependency and mobility risks.

Migrant workers choose New Zealand for better career prospects. They expect to earn higher wages in developed countries, even if their stay is intended as a short-term financial move instead of a long-term career path. New Zealand has several industries that are well-developed. Consequently, migrant labourers expect that they will develop a decent career in New Zealand. Further, New Zealand is a relatively stable and high-income economy. According to World Bank (2025), in 2023 Gross National Income (GNI) per capita of New Zealand is around \$48,000 whereas migrant-source countries, such as India (GNI per capita \$2,540) or Philippines (GNI per capita \$4,320) fall in the middle-income group. Consequently, the relative prosperity of New Zealand makes it an attractive destination for employees seeking higher wages and better living standards. Migrants enjoy the strong economy and currency of New Zealand and send remittances to their home, which allows their families to pursue a better life. New Zealand's

economy also benefits from migrants by allocating migrant labour to jobs that New Zealanders are less likely to fill.

## 1.2. Research Questions

Figure 1.2 shows the number of visas approved between 1997-98 and 2017-18. This Figure shows that New Zealand has approved a significant number of work visas in this 20-year period. Student visas are fluctuating, showing growth, decline, and growth trends. Comparatively, the residence visa showed limited fluctuation and remained consistent. The growing trend in the work visa shows New Zealand's reliance on migrant labour for its various industries.



*Figure 1.2 Visa trends 1997-98 to 2017-18*

Although New Zealand relies on migrant labour for its primary and secondary industries, which indeed also benefit the labourers, there is also a dark aspect of this practice. Studies and governmental reports have shown that migrant exploitation in the workplace is a serious concern (Stringer, 2016; Bi, 2016; Yuan et al., 2014). As discussed above, migrant workers experience various forms of exploitation ranging from under-payment of wages to health and safety concerns (Collins & Stringer, 2023) which can be exacerbated due to the employer-sponsored visa. Migrant exploitation is also evident in other similar countries to New Zealand, like Canada,

the United States, and the United Kingdom (Berg & Farbenblum, 2018; Rodgers, 2018; FLEX, 2017).

Academic research and commissioned reports have put forward suggestions to reduce migrant labour exploitation. For example, Collins and Stringer (2023) argue that the employer-assisted visa is one of the main causes of labour exploitation because it makes the migrant dependent on their sponsor. Likewise, the New Zealand Productivity Commission (NZPC) (2022) also raised concerns regarding employer-assisted visas and recommended to review the visa categories periodically and avoid tying workers to single employers. Academics, such as Collins and Stringer (2023) and the NZPC (2022) agree that the terms of employer-sponsored scheme should be altered to improve outcomes for the workers. However, there are other drivers of exploitation reported in studies and government reports that must be addressed. These include fear of retaliation (E&Y, 2018), limited work opportunities (MBIE, 2015), cultural differences, lack of knowledge about rights (Searle et al., 2015a), limited enforcement (CAB, 2017), and the burden of debts and remittances that migrant workers carry (Yuan et al., 2014). All of these issues will be explored in the next chapter in detail.

Despite recommendations for changes to policy settings, the employer-sponsored scheme remains in place. This raises a question regarding the government's sincerity in addressing migrant exploitation. More research is required to understand why the government has not responded more strongly to this issue. While existing scholarship has catalogued the various forms of migrant-worker exploitation and identified its economic, social and institutional drivers (Collins & Stringer, 2023; Yuan et al., 2014; Anderson D. , 2014), it has largely overlooked how political parties themselves talk about—and thus frame—the problem. Yet the policy narratives associated with political parties shape legislative agendas, influence public attitudes, and determine which reforms are even considered (Crow & Jones, 2018; Shanahan et al., 2011; Skilling, 2013). By analysing how different parties construct the “migrant exploitation” issue in speeches, manifestos and press releases, we can reveal the discursive fault lines that have so far escaped empirical scrutiny—and understand why certain policy solutions gain traction while others never reach the table. This gap in the literature leads to two core questions that guide this research:

- How do different political parties in New Zealand represent the issue of seasonal migrant labour in policies, parliamentary debates, and press releases?
- Research question 2: What are the main themes in New Zealand political discourse that limit how migrant labour exploitation is understood and addressed?

### **1.3. Structure of the Thesis**

This thesis is structured into six chapters. The first chapter has provided a background of migrant labour exploitation and developed relevant research questions. The second chapter will review the literature focusing on the forms that migrant worker exploitation takes, and the key drivers of this exploitation. The third chapter discusses the methods for collecting and analysing the necessary data. The fourth chapter analyses the data, focusing on specific themes emerging from the data. The fifth chapter discusses the findings in relation to the research questions. The final chapter provides a conclusion and recommendations. The next chapter surveys why New Zealand needs SML, and then provides a summary of visa categories and schemes (focussing on the RSE and AEWV schemes), forms of SML exploitation, drivers of SML exploitation and explains the political consensus on these issues.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### 2.1. New Zealand's Need for Seasonal Migrant Labour

New Zealand relies significantly on seasonal migrant labour (SML) for its agriculture, horticulture, viticulture, hospitality, telecommunications, and construction industries. From the 1950s, New Zealand focused on Pacific Island countries to fill labour shortages in the manufacturing, horticulture, and agriculture industries (Arrowsmith, 2024). Although New Zealand still depends on Pacific Island countries to address labour shortages, the migration system liberalisation of the 1990s also allowed employers to recruit labour more easily from India, the Philippines, and China (Doan et al., 2023). As the demand for industry sector products increased, New Zealand continued to rely on migrant workers. For example, the reconstruction of Christchurch after the 2011 earthquake required temporary workers in the construction industry, leading to the hiring of many Filipino workers (Niransha & Suzzane, 2020). Likewise, the horticulture industry requires a significant number of labourers for the planting and harvesting of apples and kiwifruits (HNZ, 2021).

New Zealand growers and different regional employers find it difficult to recruit domestic labour not because unemployed people are unwilling to work, but because seasonal work has a mix of constraints. Firstly, seasonal jobs are unattractive due to their short duration, physical demands, remote locations, and minimum pay (refer to Table 2.1). Recently, Jobseeker beneficiaries lost 70 cents a dollar once they started earning NZ\$90 per week. After 2021, this threshold increased to NZ\$160 per week, risking a stand-down period before payments resume when the season finishes (Airey, 2021). A three-month apple harvest (short-term work) reduces welfare payments. Third, there are easier options available. For example, most new job openings are urban and operate the whole year. Cafes, warehouses, and call centres put “help wanted” to reflect job vacancies and many candidates favour indoor work. Further, harvest work is done rapidly and is most profitable when performed by experienced workers: 20 trained workers are more productive than 20 novices (Bedford, 2020). Consequently, employers lobby for the RSE scheme while locals have little interest in the industry dominated by Pacific and Asian workers. Lastly, media reporting about piece rates, low wages, poor housing, and contracting malpractices make the sector appear precarious to prospective workers. The New Zealand Institute of Economic

Research (NZIER) stated that “perceived low wages and poor labour welfare” as lasting myths and realities that affect recruitment (RuralLeaders, 2022).

<b>Issue</b>	<b>What it looks like in the field?</b>	<b>Why does this discourage locals?</b>	<b>Evidence</b>
Short, irregular seasons	6-12 week harvest or pruning period, often cancelled if it rains.	Unstable income and difficulty paying utilities, rent, and childcare.	NZIER cited that the seasonal and inconsistent nature of agriculture, horticulture and viticulture work discourages locals (RuralLeaders, 2022).
Physically demanding, outdoors	Heavy picking bags, extensive hours on ladders or in packaging houses.	Aged or unfit candidates struggle; health and safety risk exists.	NZIER and growers stated that horticulture is “arduous work” (Nagar, 2020).
Rural location & housing	Jobs located in Bay of Plenty, Hawke’s Bay, and Marlborough.	Relocation costs and scarce short-term rentals reduce potential earnings.	Rural isolation and limited affordable housing deters workers (Bedford, 2020).
Pay close to minimum, often piece-rate	Typical earnings are just above the minimum wage; bonus depends on accuracy and speed.	Retail or hospitality work pays similar money with steady hours.	Wage rates increased little over the past decade (Bedford, 2020). Growers accepted that limited pay increases their reliance on SML (Nagar, 2020).

*Table 2.1: Why New Zealanders see seasonal jobs less attractive*

The Ministry of Primary Industries (2020) recorded a continuous labour shortfall in seasonal peaks. Industries such as horticulture, construction and hospitality thus have a strong interest in being able to fill their labour needs as easily and cheaply as possible. For example, in 2020, horticulture generated NZ\$6.2 billion, while agriculture, fishing, and forestry are also significant contributors to New Zealand’s gross domestic product (HNZ, 2020). As exports from these primary sectors support regional employment and a large share of national income, previous

governments have strong fiscal and political reasons to protect them, most apparently through designing visa and labour-supply policies, such as the RSE and AEWV schemes that ensure primary industries have a consistent flow of affordable seasonal labour. Thus, without seasonal labour, New Zealand can suffer crop wastage (affecting farmers' incomes), financial losses (reduced profitability of farmers, one report (NZKFG, 2019) estimated that labour shortages could lead to loss of million-dollar revenue), and negatively affect export markets (unable to meet demand affects New Zealand's reputation in the export market).

## **2.2. Visa Categories and Schemes**

New Zealand's legislative framework comprises the Immigration Act 2009 and ministerial powers to introduce immigration policies. The Immigration Act 2009 is the key piece of legislation that governs immigration in New Zealand. This Act offers the legal framework for all immigration policies and visa classifications (VisaMax, 2025). Within the Immigration Act 2009, the Minister of Immigration is authorised to issue immigration instructions, which include the criteria and conditions for different visa classifications. The instructions are detailed policy guidelines that work within the scope of the Immigration Act.

The visa categories that this thesis focused on, including the RSE scheme and the AEWV schemes, have been established using ministerial discretion, rather than through specific legislation in parliament. The RSE scheme was established on 20 October 2006 by David Benson-Pope (Social Development & Employment Minister) and David Cunliffe (Immigration Minister) and became operational in April 2007 (Bedford & Bedford, 2023) while the AEWV scheme was established by Michael Wood (Immigration Minister) on 4 July 2022 (Wood, 2022). Subsequent changes to these visa categories can be implemented administratively by the Minister of Immigration and INZ. The next chapter provides an analysis of the positions of key political parties within New Zealand.

Successive New Zealand governments have introduced several visa categories and schemes to overcome labour shortages in the country's key industries. However, this thesis will not focus on all of the visa schemes. Other categories or schemes, such as international student visas, post-study work visas, essential skills visas, and working holiday schemes, are not the focus of this paper because these categories do not provide long-term solutions, and workers do not have specific experience in agriculture or construction (refer to Table 2.1 for more details).

Unlike RSE and AEWV, other visa categories are unable to provide sufficient labour supply. For example, international student visas have a maximum of 20 work hours per week amid study periods so it does not fulfil full-time or seasonal labour demands. International students mainly emphasise education which limits their work availability. Working holidays and post-study work visas are also on a temporary visit (usually 1-2 years) within New Zealand. These visa categories overcome mobility and dependency risks as they are not tied with employers, but they do not offer a long-term workforce. Yet, horticulture and viticulture industries need low-to-semi skilled labour that essential skills visas do not provide. Additionally these visa categories (International students, working holidays, post-study work, and essential skills) do not offer adequate labour supply according to the needs of key industries. Further, limited work hours, and limited job types that workers on these visas can undertake limit the pool of workers. Table 2.2 differentiates each visa category/scheme

While the RSE and AEWV schemes relate to individual workers who reside for up to 9 months in New Zealand, taken as a whole they offer a permanent labour supply. Bedford and Bedford (2023) reported that more than half of Pacific workers returned to New Zealand at least for a second season. Further, the RSE scheme is popular in the New Zealand labour market, which is evident in a continuous increase in the cap. For example, the 2024-25 RSE labour cap is 20,750, which increased from 19,500 from the previous year, highlighting that the RSE scheme fulfils labour demand in the long term (NZFAT, 2025). As workers arrive through RSE or AEWV schemes revolving within farms season after season, industries receive a consistent workforce through these schemes, even though workers are on a temporary visa. Unlike working-holiday or international students (having infrequent availability and limited working hours), RSE and AEWV offer a predictable flow of workers who are skilled and can be hired at a lower cost. Thus, these schemes appear as a long-term solution for horticulture and viticulture to mitigate labour shortages.

Given these considerations, this thesis will focus on RSE and the AEWV. Both RSE and AEWV are specifically designed to channel workers into industries that experience labour shortages, such as horticulture, viticulture, dairy, meat processing, and, more recently, residential and infrastructure construction. These schemes also apply specific compliance structures (wage floors, pastoral-care obligations, accommodation standards, and employer-accreditation tests)

that make them the subject of debate in the parliament. The RSE and AEWV scheme have been debated in parliament because they raise important political questions to do with productivity (do these schemes encourage firms to become innovative or to rely on low-wage models?), regional development (how do increase in SML and sector agreements meet the needs of, for e.g., Marlborough orchards versus Auckland building sites?), and employment standards (do existing safeguards to protect worker welfare limit exploitation?). Taken together, these schemes represent the largest volume of employer-sponsored labour. The RSE scheme was capped at 20,750 SML in 2023/24 season along with mandatory pastoral-care, accommodation and wage standards (Stanford, 2024a; INZ, 2025a) while the AEWV category covered 80,000+ migrants (INZ, 2025b). As noted above, these schemes also gained significant parliamentary review, human rights scrutiny, and media attention about wages, productivity, and exploitation (Little, 2023; NZHR, 2022). Focusing on these two schemes will allow this thesis to analyse the two largest and politically contentious immigration schemes through which the government achieves labour shortage. The following sections will explain these two schemes.

<b>Scheme</b>	<b>Sector</b>	<b>Targeted Nation(s)</b>	<b>Duration</b>	<b>Employer Tie</b>	<b>Wage/Skill Threshold</b>	<b>Annual Cap</b>	<b>Exploitation Risk</b>	<b>Policy Goal</b>
RSE	Horticulture/Viticulture only	Pacific nations (primarily)	7-9 months	Yes	Min. wage No skills needed	20,750	High (tied visa, isolation, poor housing)	Pacific development and labour shortages
AEWV	Broad (e.g., construction, hospitality)	All	Up to 5 years	Yes	Media wage 2+ years' exp. Level qual.	None	High (debt and dependency)	Labour and skills shortage
Intl. Student	All (limited hours)	All	Study duration	No	None	None	Moderate (underpayment in casual work)	Education
Working Holiday	All (open rights)	Selected countries	12-23 months	No	None	None	Low-Moderate (casual, flexible)	Youth travel
Post-study Work	All (open rights)	All	1-3 years	No	None	None	Low (graduate focus)	Skilled talent

*Table 2.2: Difference between labour schemes*

## **2.3. The Registered Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme**

### **2.3.1. Key Features**

Before 2007, the New Zealand government did not have a policy to regulate temporary migrant workers. At this time, migrant workers could obtain either permanent or seasonal work using general immigration classifications. In 2007, the New Zealand government introduced the RSE scheme which allowed employers to register (this process required them to secure RSE status: Employers must gain RSE status from INZ, comply with required welfare standards, and then each season apply for an Agreement to Recruit which confirms the number of workers sought and is approved by INZ before recruiting) and recruit employees from the following Pacific Island countries in the horticulture and viticulture industries: the Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, the Republic of Marshall Islands, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu (INZ, 2025a).

The RSE policy has four features. It includes employer sponsorship which ties workers to the employer who sponsored their visa, preventing workers from switching jobs (INZ, 2025a). Secondly, the visas are seasonal, lasting up to seven months and requiring workers to return to their home countries (INZ, 2025a). Third, the policy focuses on Pacific nations to support the economy of targeted countries while fulfilling labour shortages in New Zealand. Employers can only hire employees from Pacific nations, such as from Fiji, Kiribati, or Nauru, unless they provide evidence of pre-established relationships with employees from other countries (INZ, 2025a). Lastly, it requires employer accreditation, which means only approved employers can hire RSE workers.

### **2.3.2. Development over time**

The development of the RSE scheme rests on three factors. *First*, it was introduced to overcome labour shortages in New Zealand's horticulture and viticulture industries. Both of these sectors experience peak seasons, such as planting and harvesting seasons for apples and kiwifruit, in which labour demand is high and jobs are difficult to fulfil with local labourers as discussed in Section 2.1 (HNZ, 2021). *Second*, the industries required a reliable workforce (that also returns in the next season) so crops are harvested on time and contracts are fulfilled; positioning SML as “essential team players” to earn foreign exchange (HNZ, 2021). *Third*, the RSE scheme also

promotes Pacific economic development as workers in these countries get employment opportunities and are able to send remittances to their home countries (Doan et al., 2023; MBIE, 2023). This improves regional ties, improves the livelihood of Pacific countries, and supports New Zealand's agricultural productivity and exports.

Since its beginning, the RSE scheme has extended significantly to meet the growing demand for labour within the agricultural sector. In its initial year, the scheme allowed hiring 5,000 workers, but this quota has increased to 19,500 in 2023, which indicates a positive response and higher employer demand for seasonal workers (Stanford, 2024a). This suggests that the scheme was successful in providing a reliable and skilled workforce that improves the productivity of the wider agricultural sector. The employer demand also indicates that they rely on SML to fulfil local and international market orders. The reasons why domestic labour is not attracted to seasonal work are discussed above.

Over the years, the RSE scheme has generated benefits for multiple stakeholders: a reliable source of labour for seasonal industries, job opportunities for the seasonal workers, remittances for their home communities. At the same time, concerns have arisen regarding the welfare of the participating workers. Studies identified issues regarding excessive working hours without sufficient rest, causing fatigue and health issues (King et al., 2017; Stringer et al., 2014). In many cases, the housing conditions of these workers are overcrowded, with insufficient facilities and poor living conditions (NZLS, 2017; Scoop, 2017). Moreover, workers in remote or rural areas are unable to access essential social services, including healthcare and social support, due to the remoteness of the area. These concerns highlight a power imbalance because workers tied to their employers may hesitate to report problems due to job loss or visa cancellation. These various forms of migrant labour exploitation will be discussed in a separate section below.

## **2.4. Accredited Employer Work Visa**

### **2.4.1. Key Features**

In 2022, the New Zealand government launched an Accredited Employer Work Visa (AEWV) to simplify and improve the hiring of migrant workers in various sectors. This visa category has four key features (INZ, 2025c). Firstly, it has employer accreditation, which requires employers to meet certain criteria to be accredited, ensuring they are genuine and compliant. Secondly, it

includes job check requirements, which means verification is required at the job level, ensuring that no local labour is available for hiring. Third, it has certain skill and salary thresholds, meaning job positions must fulfil minimum wage and skill level criteria. Fourth, this visa ties employment with a particular job and employer, limiting workers' job mobility. The differences between the RSE and AEWV schemes are discussed below.

#### **2.4.2. Differences between AEWV and RSE**

It is important here to explain how the AEWV is different from the RSE scheme and to clarify if they are separate schemes, or whether they intersect with each other: is the AEWV designed to improve the RSE scheme, or are they quite separate? Legally, the schemes are separate as they are grounded in their set of immigration rules: holding or sponsoring one has no automatic impact on the other. In practice, however, the schemes overlap to a limited extent. For example, some horticulture employers use both schemes (RSE for picking season and AEWV for whole year supervision or operating machinery). However, the visas have different channels. Both schemes also require employer accreditation or recognition so many employers accustomed to one scheme may find the other scheme similar. Lastly, AEWV is not introduced to fix issues with the RSE scheme. Instead, it is introduced to replace the previous six work-visa categories and the wage/skill threshold of the entire labour market. The RSE has not changed since its introduction (except for periodic cap increases and welfare tweaks) and targets Pacific workers only. In reality, the RSE and AEWV schemes complement each other (AEWV fills year around vacancies while RSE fills seasonal ones) but they are separate schemes with different goals, target migrants, and policy logics.

#### **2.4.3. Development over time**

The AEWV was designed to improve immigration to New Zealand and consolidate different existing temporary working visas into a single efficient category. The consolidation includes, for example, the Essential Skills Work Visa, the Talent (Accredited Employer) Work Visa, and the Long Term Skill Shortage List Work Visa (INZ, 2025d; INZ, 2025e; INZ, 2025f). By merging these visas into one single process, the government reduced visa process complexity for both employers and employees. This change makes it easier for accredited employers to hire migrants, while it also allows migrants to navigate the immigration system more easily. Thus, it meets the labour market's needs for efficiency and responsiveness.

One of the objectives of the AEWV is to improve the protection of migrant workers by mandating employers to become accredited prior to hiring any overseas employee. Accreditation includes complying with specific standards regarding business practices, employment laws, and worker welfare (INZ, 2025g). Employers are required to prove that they are financially stable, have good working practices, and have dedicated systems to adjust migrants into new working roles. This vetting process intends to protect migrants, but it can go the other way in cases where employers exercise undue authority and power over them. For example, a Public Service Commission review (2024) identified that when the borders re-opened, INZ “decreased the number of checks” to speed up processing and “exposed the scheme to an increased risk of exploitation by unscrupulous agents or employers”. Further, an RNZ investigation (2024) identified that around 200 accredited employers had their licenses suspended or revoked after migrants (from India, China, and Bangladesh) who had paid large recruitment fees were not hired, and those workers who were hired were housed in “cramped and unsanitary” conditions (Xia, Nearly 200 employers stripped of right to hire migrants over visa scams, 2024).

The AEWV structure is intended to protect employees, but it ties migrants with their employers (PSC, 2024). This dependency can lead to vulnerabilities like those discussed in the RSE scheme. Migrants may not be able to leave their exploitative jobs without jeopardising their visas. The anxiety of losing employment and the cancellation of a visa can discourage employees from reporting mistreatment or raising their voices about their working conditions (Stringer et al., 2014). This leads to a power imbalance, leaving migrants at the mercy of employers despite the scheme’s stated protective intentions.

## **2.5. Forms of Migrant Labour Exploitation**

### **2.5.1. Payments to Labour Recruiters**

Many migrant workers made significant payments to recruitment companies to get work in New Zealand. According to INZ (2025h), paying fees to recruiters to obtain a job is illegal in New Zealand. Chiang (2018) reported that Chinese migrants paid NZ\$40,000-NZ\$57,000 to recruiters in their own country to obtain a work visa. These workers are vulnerable due to their limited knowledge of New Zealand’s working environment, and recruiters in their home countries are often successful in obtaining significant sums of money. Moreover, Stringer (2016) identified

that some employers illegally demand payments of NZ\$3,000-NZ\$15,000 from potential candidates before offering them a job. Employers or recruitment firms charged higher prices for jobs that offered the promise of residency or citizenship, with charges for such services reported to be between NZ\$30,000 to NZ\$50,000 (Christeller & Santos, n.d.), or even up to \$60,000 (Stringer, 2016). Migrant workers arrange these fees by themselves. They take loans and mortgage any family assets they have. These loans are themselves exploitation for migrants because of higher interest rates. This means that workers need to work many years to pay these loans before saving any money for remittances, placing them in a highly vulnerable situation.

Migrant workers migrate to first-world countries because these countries provide better career or earning opportunities than are possible in their home countries. Consequently, these labourers are also expected to remit their earnings to their families. It is already discussed in the initial section of this review that migrant labourers take debts to support their migration and they are required to work long hours to pay off their debts (Stringer et al., 2022). This means that they are often willing to accept precarious jobs. “Education agents” are brokers (normally third parties) who help students migrate with a “study + work” pathway through selling packages that bundle tuition, visas, and guaranteed jobs. Stringer (2016) demonstrates that many of these agents work in exactly the same supply chains that promote low-wage migrant labour into New Zealand’s horticulture and other sectors. New Zealand’s high cost of living, combined debt repayment burden and limited access to any financial assistance, increases the pressure on these workers (Stringer et al., 2022). Thus, migrant workers take extensive risks by migrating to New Zealand. These labourers also need more funds to access legal services (Christeller & Santos, n.d.).

### **2.5.2. Contract Falsification**

Another way to exploit migrant workers is to prepare false contracts. In these cases, employers or recruiters share a contract with the potential migrant worker in their home country that has a promising position and good pay rate. When the worker arrives in New Zealand, they are presented with another contract that has a different position or pay or sometimes both (Stringer et al., 2022). Shaw (2019) reported on the situation of a Bangladeshi chef being offered NZ\$17 per hour for six days a week when the worker was in his home country. Upon arriving in New Zealand, the worker was paid NZ\$7-8 per hour. These workers may need to work for long hours without any breaks. Contract falsification can open the door for other types of exploitation.

While this can occur in any industry within New Zealand, Stringer (2016) identified that it is mostly done in the fishing industry. Migrant workers often feel compelled to honour these contracts because they have to repay the money they have borrowed to get the job. Despite knowing that signing a new contract would lead to the loss of the initial contract, workers sign new contracts to earn some money for their families and for themselves.

### **2.5.3. Wage Theft**

Wage theft is the most common type of exploitation among migrant workers. According to the Human Rights Commission (2024), migrants have reported being underpaid or even unpaid for the work they did in various industries. Employers also threaten employees about reporting wage theft to immigration authorities, threatening to deport employees who report (Human Rights Commission, 2024). The prevalence of this issue varies across industries. For example, Ghorbani (2022) reported that immigrants working in the construction industry earn around or sometimes more than the minimum wage, but less than industry standards and below the wages that other workers with equivalent experience earn in identical jobs. Meanwhile, many migrant workers in the hospitality industry receive \$5 per hour (Stringer et al., 2022). Some migrants are underpaid but required to work more hours. Despite having a legal contract, many employers do not pay legal wages to immigrants for the hours they work. For example, an employee might work for 40 hours but only be paid for 20 hours (Stringer & Michailova, 2019). This issue is prevalent in the hospitality industry (Stringer & Michailova, 2019). It is difficult to identify the effect and extent of wage theft. This is due to the under-reporting noted above, but also because migrant workers often receive cash wages, which allows employers to avoid taxes and other legal obligations.

### **2.5.4. Long Working Hours**

Besides wage theft, many migrant workers are required to work excessive hours. While this issue has been alluded to above, it is a separate issue that warrants its own discussion. Even if the workers receive pay for all the hours they work, if they work long hours without any breaks, then there is a danger to their health and safety both inside and outside of the workplace.

Workers in this situation experience exhaustion and isolation, which can lead to a significant physical and mental toll (Hasan et al., 2021). Recently, a restaurant chain named Daaku Kebab was alleged to force workers to work more than 8 hours per day (up to 17 hours) without any pay (Tan, 2024). In another similar case, LJ Foods Taupo Limited required excessive work from

migrant employees. The employees worked for 52.5 hours per week but only received wages equivalent to 40 hours per week (ENZ, 2024). Moreover, these employees also worked on more than 20 public holidays and were not paid correct entitlements (ENZ, 2024). Stringer (2022) reported that employers threatened to deport employees if they reported this exploitation to authorities, resulting in one employee working 18 hours per day and another working 12 hours per day.

### **2.5.5. Health and Safety**

Another type of exploitation that migrant workers experience is related to health and safety. While all workers experience health and safety issues during employment, migrant workers tend to experience a greater number of health and safety risks. Searle et al. (2015b) studied health and safety risks in the construction industry and identified two issues. Firstly, employers are not taking care of the health and safety of employees. Secondly, employees lack the language skills to convey safety issues to colleagues or employers. While the extent of these issues is not clear, King et al. (2017) argue that it is undeniable that authorities need to pay attention to this issue. Communication appears to be vital to conveying information about safety matters in the workplace.

Searle et al. (2015b) and Ghorbani (2022) also identified that personal protective equipment (PPE) is another issue that leads to worker exploitation. Workers are charged for PPE if they are required to perform hazardous work. For example, MacLennan (2018) found that Filipino workers were given PPE but that the cost of this PPE (\$50) was deducted from their wages. Employers are obliged to provide PPE to workers under the Health and Safety at Work Act so such deductions are unlawful. In some situations, workers are not provided with PPE at all to perform hazardous tasks. For example, MBIE review showed that migrant workers were not provided PPE when handling hazardous materials, such as asbestos (Stringer & Michailova, 2019). However, the existing literature is unable to identify the extent of this issue.

Another issue concerning health and safety is the reporting. Stringer et al. (2022) argues that many health and safety incidents are managed separately and not reported in the workplace health and safety system. The New Zealand Council of Trade Union (2013), in one submission, argues that workers on seasonal arrangements feel unable to raise health and safety issues in the workplace due to future hiring concerns.

Moreover, migrant workers have lower claim rates for work health and safety issues than local New Zealanders. Several issues may lead to lower claim rates. For example, migrant workers have limited knowledge of the accident compensation process or are unable to access public services due to their visa status (Radka et al., 2022). Although this explains why the claim rate is lower for migrant workers than for non-migrant ones, more research is required on this issue.

## **2.6. Drivers of Migrant Labour Exploitation**

### **2.6.1. Labour Market Deregulation**

From the mid-1980s to the 1990s, New Zealand experienced a significant shift in its economic and social policies, towards deregulation, a free market, and a neo-liberal society. The government implemented several economic reforms rooted in neoliberal ideology, which focused on minimum government intervention, privatisation, and individual rather than collective welfare (Williamson et al., 2017; Williamson & Harris, 2024). Neo-liberal reforms began in New Zealand under the Fourth Labour Government (1984–1990). These reforms were extended under the subsequent National Government (1990–1996). The government justified these reforms by claiming that a free-market economy would be more efficient and innovative, and that it would achieve higher growth (Slattery et al., 2013).

These changes included reform of the employment relations system, altering the relationship between employers, employees, and unions. The overall result of this policy reform was an environment that favoured employers and eroded protections for employees. According to Williamson et al. (2017), one notable initiative of the National Government was the Employment Contracts Act (ECA) 1991, which is the key legislation that integrated neo-liberalism in the employment relations domain. The ECA completely departed from the existing industrial relations framework, which had been characterised by strong arbitration and collective bargaining. The new legislation replaced the industry-level award system and mandatory union membership with enterprise-level bargaining (Wilson, 2010). The industry-level award system was a framework in which wages, working conditions, and different employment terms were negotiated and set across entire industries using collective bargaining, usually with the help of unions. The agreements signed in these negotiations are called ‘awards’ which applied to all

employees within a particular industry, leading to standardised conditions irrespective of the individual employer.

The ECA 1991 replaced New Zealand's multi-employer awards system with individual contracts, transferring power to employers. Union powers were limited, arbitration was eliminated, and industrial actions restricted. The Act took away the collective leverage of workers (notably those with low bargaining power) they had long depended on (Williamson & Harris, 2024). Proponents argued that the Act improved "freedom of choice", but without collectivism many employees had to accept conditions imposed unilaterally by the employer or risk unemployment; making promised autonomy illusory (Wilson, 2010). Williamson et al.'s (2017) analysis of the Tourist Hotel Corporation (THC) illustrates these power dynamics. After privatisation of THC, Southern Pacific Hotels Corporation took advantage of the ECA by replacing national awards with individual agreements, abolishing penalty rates, and reducing union involvement. Thus, multi-employer negotiation was overtaken by individual-level employee negotiations, the ECA allowed employers to normalise lower pay and conditions in all sectors, institutionalised individualism, and eliminated workforce capacity to negotiate fair wage (or living wage) or humane treatment.

The neoliberal reforms have had significant consequences on the labour market. These include reduced job security (RuralLeaders, 2022), lower wages and benefits (Stringer et al., 2022) and poor working conditions (Human Rights Commission, 2024). Temporary migrant labourers who have limited power in a host country such as New Zealand are severely affected by neo-liberal reforms as they have limited job security and typically receive lower wages and benefits (Stringer & Michailova, 2019). Economic efficiency and free-market capitalism are prioritised over workers' wellbeing, eroding the social contract between employers and employees.

### **2.6.2. Employer-Assisted Visa**

Employer-assisted visas are one of the perils and arguably the leading factor that leads to migrant labour exploitation (Collins & Stringer, 2022). These visas bond the migrant workers with employers, making it difficult or even impossible for employees to look for other jobs (PSC, 2024). This system benefits individual employers and the industries they operate in, but they facilitate the abuse of migrant workers. This type of visa makes the migrant workers dependent on their employer to satisfy visa conditions (Clibborn & Wright, 2023). Thus, employer-assisted

visas prevent migrant workers from speaking against unjust acts at the workplace, further increasing the chances of future abuse (Chen, 2018) and making it difficult for academics, research organisations, and the government to assess the level of exploitation since workers are reluctant to discuss workplace abuse.

### **2.6.3. Deportation**

Related to the above point, studies have also identified that workers are reluctant to speak against employers because they are afraid of deportation, losing a visa, or becoming unemployed (Chen, 2018; Clibborn & Wirght, 2023). Collins and Stringer (2023) offers an example of a worker trapped due to their circumstances. When this worker's working holiday visa expired, he was intimidated to accept informal work. The financial situation in his country of origin was poor so he accepted the offer of informal work despite his lack of legal right to work in New Zealand. Collins and Stringer (2023) mentioned that the worker worked in the worst conditions, carried scorching items, did overtime, and was even beaten by the employer. The worker never discussed these working conditions due to the consequences of losing his job or deportation, instead hoping that the situation would improve (Collins & Stringer, 2023). The extent to which workers are afraid of deportation is unknown in New Zealand, since many of these cases are never reported. The fear arises from the behaviour of owners, experiences of other employees, and immigration policies, which encourage the consequences in most cases.

### **2.6.4. Inability to Access Work**

The MBIE (2018a) conducted a study to identify difficulties that migrant workers experienced in accessing work. This study highlighted several barriers facing migrant workers in the New Zealand labour market, including limited experience, lack of English capabilities, or skills or experience that are unacceptable in the New Zealand context (MBIE, 2018a). While this issue is not relevant precisely to the RSE and AEWV schemes, it is part of the broader context and discussed here to provide a broader perspective. Carlsson et al. (2023) argues that these barriers limit employment choices and migrant workers eventually accept jobs that offer lower wages than the national minimum wage or poor working conditions below the national employment standards. Employees accept such jobs because they consider it their last option and employers are ready to take advantage of migrants' circumstances (Carlsson et al., 2023). According to Human Rights Commission (2024), around 3 out of 10 immigrants stated that it is not

straightforward to find employment in New Zealand. This highlights that a large number of migrant workers are facing difficulty getting a job in New Zealand. It also highlights a key issue surrounding the issue of experiences and circumstances of migrant labour exploitation.

While migrant workers accept employment for several reasons, they also act negligently and are responsible for their exploitation to some extent. Migrant workers sometimes violate their visa obligations or work more hours than they are legally allowed. For instance, international students sometimes work long hours and breach their visa condition of time-limit (Stringer et al., 2022). Many employers take benefit of this situation by paying low wages or threatening workers with deportation. Again, it is difficult to identify the extent of this issue since migrant workers are reluctant to report exploitation. Still, limited work opportunities for immigrants lead to less risky but significant types of exploitation.

### **2.6.5. Law Enforcement**

Law enforcement agencies have the potential to control employment exploitation. New Zealand experienced a significant arrival of migrant labour in the last two decades, which limited enforcement authorities' ability to maintain strong checks and balances. For instance, one officer inspects around 14,000 (approx.) workers in New Zealand compared to the International Labour Organisation recommendation that one officer will inspect 10,000 workers (NZCTU, 2020). This limited enforcement provides confidence to employers that authorities will not be able to detect and punish their wrongdoings. In the post-COVID era, enforcement further faced strained capacity, with inspectors directed towards other tasks such as wage subsidy audits and wider controls. Xia (2022) highlight specific failures, such as slow responses to complaints about overcrowded housing and wage theft in horticulture, where RSE workers are vulnerable because of remote locations and employer-tied visas.

Enforcement capacity also acts as a driver of SML exploitation – defined as the labour inspectorate's ability to investigate, prosecute, and avoid exploitation using resources like staffing, tools, and processes. In New Zealand, the MBIE manages this through the Labour Inspectorate, which has confronted criticism for lower investigation rates and reactive approaches. For example, from 2021-2022, MBIE received 1,018 complaints related to exploitation, but only 10% were investigated, out of which 28 just completed while 10 leading to

enforcement (MBIE, 2024). This shows a 70% reduction in investigations compared to 2018-2022 due to case complexity, evidence shortages, and understaffing (MBIE, 2024).

### **2.6.6. Funding Constraints**

Funding constraints increase capacity issues, constraining hiring, training, and technology for inspections. MBIE's budget for SML enforcement has been set to \$50 million in 2020 under the Worker Protection Bill, which imposes infringement notices and stand-down periods for non-compliant employers (MBIE, 2020). However, data on actual spending is not available. The 2024 Regulatory Impact Statement from MBIE plans expanding fines (\$1,000 for document delays) and targets (14-day response deadlines) (Penk, 2025), but with funding constraints, these remain ambitious.

Case volumes increased 450% in 2021-2022 with the launch of a migrant exploitation helpline (Xia, 2022). A 2024 Human Rights Commission review of AEWV emphasised that underfunding responsible for "systemic vulnerabilities," such as insufficient monitoring of recruitment fees (\$15,000-\$60,000 premiums) and accommodation standards. New Zealand could increase labour inspectorate budget but prioritises economic recovery over welfare.

### **2.7. Union Views**

Unions in general criticise the RSE and AEWV schemes, calling them “modern slavery” via employer dependency and weak enforcement. The NZCTU criticises recent RSE changes (higher accommodation costs and no wage premium) as an erosion of rights, as there was no consultation involved, a breach of bipartisan norms (Wagstaff, 2024). Unite Union argues that AEWV's recent tweaks are a bipartisan failure, as they transfer risks to employees and reduce wages (Unite, 2024). Both major unions agree that weak enforcement, such as infringement offences and stand-down lists, is responsible for migrant labour exploitation. The 2023 RSE Tripartite Group urged the inclusion of unions in pastoral care. Still, implementation gaps remain, highlighting the need for cross-party prioritisation of industry over workers (Human Rights Commission, 2024).

### **2.8 Conclusion**

This chapter so far reviewed the key literature related to SML. Several reasons point to New Zealand's demand for seasonal migrants. SML is often brought in to perform work that is unstable, remote, poorly paid and physically demanding. Growers in rural areas understand they

will be unable to fill vacancies from the local pool due to benefits and better alternatives for local workers in urban areas. The RSE and AEWV schemes source most of the seasonal labour and have attracted significant media scrutiny. Consequently, these schemes will be the focus in the rest of this thesis. Several forms of exploitation are identified including payments to labour recruiters, fabricated contracts, wage theft, extensive working hours, and health and safety. Several drivers of exploitation are identified including the deregulated labour market, tethered visa, deportation, limited work opportunities, and law enforcement.

This thesis holds that the rules that administer migrant-labour schemes are related to the narratives articulated by politicians regarding labour shortfalls, economic growth and worker wellbeing. Based on the constructivist/interpretivist perspective, parliamentary debates, ministerial press releases, and select-committee debates are not distractions but can be considered primary data that construct: (1) problems – which facets of SML are emphasised and which are neglected, (2) causal claims – whom politicians blame for these problems, and (3) the reform options and solutions that are available. Analysis of these narratives show how RSE and AEWV schemes are legitimised despite significant evidence of exploitation. The analysis informs why drivers of exploitation (such as employer-tied visa continue) and why potential regulatory responses are seen as risks to industry competitiveness. Thus, analysis of parliament debates and ministerial releases shows us how problems are understood in specific ways, and how solutions are ruled in or out.

The next chapter will provide details of the methodology to explore MP's discourse. This will be done by searching through the Beehive website, the Hansard database of parliamentary debates, government reports, and media articles. Data collection and analysis procedures will be discussed in detail.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### 3.3. Introduction

The literature survey in the previous chapter has confirmed that migrant labour exploitation is a pressing issue. Most studies in the literature have reported *how* these workers are exploited and *why* exploitation occurs, focusing on the drivers of exploitation (Yuan et al., 2014; Searle et al., 2015a; Bi, 2016; Stringer & Michailova, 2019; Anderson D. , 2014). However, a key gap in the literature is that successive New Zealand governments have been fully aware that exploitation has occurred. But neither National-led nor Labour-led governments have been willing to meaningfully respond. This is especially puzzling in the case of the Labour Party, since they are expected to be on the side of protecting workers. This study thus explores how New Zealand's mainstream political parties frame the issue of migrant-worker exploitation. Analysing the manifestos, parliamentary speeches, media releases, and media articles related to major political parties, this thesis aims to answer the following two questions:

- How do different political parties in New Zealand represent the issue of seasonal migrant labour in policies, parliamentary debates, and press releases?
- What are the main themes in New Zealand political discourse that limit how migrant labour exploitation is understood and addressed?

This emphasis on political party discourse is important, because policy narratives both reflect and shape the policy agenda through two ways. They can determine which solutions gain prominence, which entities bear responsibility and how the public and media perceive the urgency of reform (Crow & Jones, 2018; Shanahan et al., 2011; Skilling, 2013). Comprehending these discursive fault lines will help to identify why some reforms have been delayed (such as changing employer-assisted visa terms) while others (such as increasing labour inspectorate capacity) gain bipartisan support.

This chapter provides an in-depth explanation and justification of how this study has been designed in order to answer these questions (Parahoo, 2014), including an explanation of how the necessary data was collected and analysed (Grove et al., 2014). It is structured into three sections. The first section will discuss methodology which includes philosophy, approach and

research design. The second section will discuss methods of data collection. The third section will discuss the methods used to analyse the data.

### **3.4. Research Philosophy**

This study adopts an interpretivist approach, based on the recognition that reality is socially constructed and that knowledge cannot be entirely identified through objective, quantifiable methods only (Neuman, 2014). An interpretive approach is crucial in this study because it goes beyond simply taking politicians' statements at face value, probing beneath the surface to uncover the assumptions, discourses, and contextual pressures that shape how New Zealand policymakers, political parties, and parliamentarians articulate their views and design policies (Yanow, 2014). This study relies on qualitative methods to identify how key actors interpret their experiences and give meaning to them. It analyses secondary data, including parliamentary speeches and government narratives.

### **3.5. Research Approach**

Research can develop a theory or test a theory. A deductive approach develops a theory and collects data to test that theory (Neuman, 2014). For example, a study following a deductive approach might theorise that a particular policy will reduce migrant labour exploitation and then test that theory by analysing relevant data. Contrastingly, the inductive approach uses its analysis of data to develop an explanatory theory (Neuman, 2014). For example, studies adopting an inductive approach might analyse data in order to develop a theory for workplace adaptation. Adopting an interpretivist philosophy, this study is inductive. Based on the literature review in Chapter 2, it aims to collect data to develop a theory that could explain why successive governments in New Zealand have not responded adequately to the problem of migrant labour exploitation. The present study does not test theory but rather to develop a theory through its analysis political parties' constructions of the issue.

### **3.6. The Importance of Framing Political Debates**

The framing of social problems in political discourse is never neutral: . Rather, it is a strategic exercise of power that identifies which sides of a problem are presented as urgent, which are deemed legitimate, which actors should be cast as heroes or villains, and which solutions should be placed on the policy table (Shanahan et al., 2018). As Jerit (2008, p. 2) argues in her analysis of rhetorical strategies:

[o]ne of the tasks facing political actors who seek to make policy change—whether they are presidents, interest groups, or policy entrepreneurs—is to generate favourable opinions about their preferred policy alternative among members of the mass public... The strength of a framing strategy rests on the notion that elites need only identify—and then emphasise—those considerations that work to their advantage.

In the immigration policy domain, political framings do crucial work in establishing who is accepted and valued, and who is seen as dangerous and undeserving. By recurrently casting SML as an “economic necessity”, “development aid”, or “flexible labour supply”, politicians legitimise schemes like RSE and AEWV that bind workers to a single employer while at the same time neglecting the exploitation that occurs due to structural dependence. Conversely, representing SML as rights-bearing actors rather than disposable commodities creates space for different policy responses such as visa portability, or stronger enforcement.

This thesis has considered political narratives not as simple rhetoric or “spin”, but robust policy-making tools (Crow & Jones, 2018; Skilling, 2013). The frames represented by ministers, party leaders, and select committees do three critical things simultaneously:

- Define the problem (“labour shortage” versus “modern slavery”);
- Allocate causal responsibility (“a few rogue employers” versus “employer-sponsored visas themselves”)
- Prescribe the boundaries of personal favourite solutions (more inspectors and fines versus decoupling visas from employers).

Since successive New Zealand governments have not addressed the structural drivers of exploitation. Most notably, the reliance on employer-assisted visas has not changed despite two decades of scandals, academic research, union campaigns, and official reviews reflecting on the same problem. It is this political representation of the issue that explains why policy responses continue to be incremental, reactive, and compliance-focused instead of transformative.

### **3.7. Research Design**

This research adopts a qualitative research design. According to Quinlan (2011), qualitative research collects and analyses qualitative data, such as text, imagery, audio or video-based data.

Creswell and Creswell (2017) state that qualitative research identifies why and how an event occurs. Qualitative research explains the reasons behind the occurrence of an event or phenomenon. It also has the potential to explain individual and intangible characteristics, such as behaviours, attitudes, perceptions, or prejudices (Crowther & Lancaster, 2012). Qualitative research provides rich data that allows for the in-depth analysis of events, including their intangible characteristics. Contrastingly, quantitative research focuses on generalisation, correlations, and cause-and-effect (Malhotra et al., 2017). The purpose of the present study is to uncover political perspectives on and representations of migrant labour exploitation, making a qualitative approach the most suitable choice.

### 3.8. Data Collection

To answer the research questions stated above, a comprehensive search was conducted to identify relevant political texts, official documents and scholarly works. The goal was to collect data from diverse sources including parliamentary debates, policy frameworks, news articles and academic sources. These diverse sources provided a breadth and depth of viewpoints of politicians, policymakers and different stakeholders.

The search process began with keywords and search strings. Initially, 12 keywords were identified, and 9 search strings were developed using those keywords (see Table 3.1). Data was collected using search engines (Google and Google Scholar), academic databases (Semantic Scholar), Auckland University of Technology library database, and the New Zealand Parliament website (Hansard).

<b>Keywords</b>	<b>Search Strings</b>
Migrant labour exploitation, migrant workers, New Zealand, political discourse, government response, MBIE, immigration policies, barriers, workplace safety.	"Migrant labour exploitation" "Government response" "migrant exploitation" "MBIE labour market migrant workers" "Immigration policies migrant workers NZ" "Barriers to addressing labour exploitation NZ" "Systemic issues migrant exploitation NZ"

*Table 3.1: Keywords and search strings*

To identify relevant data related to the research questions, inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed. Table 3.2 lists these criteria:

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<b>Inclusion</b>	<b>Exclusion</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Relevance:</i> Sources that only discuss migrant labour exploitation in New Zealand.</li><li>• <i>Language:</i> Sources available in English.</li><li>• <i>Scope:</i> Covers political discourse or government actions.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Duplicate articles</li><li>• Sources that do not include the views of NZ political parties</li></ul>

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*Table 3.2: Inclusion and exclusion criteria*

The present study focuses on the position of major political parties in New Zealand toward migrant labour exploitation. This produced an original data set that consists of a range of sources including parliamentary debates, political party websites and election manifestos, press releases by members of parliament (MPs) from each party, interviews or media articles.

### **3.8.1. Parliamentary Debates (Hansard)**

Hansard is the official transcript of parliamentary debates. It records everything said in the House of Representatives, providing a detailed account of discussions, arguments, and decisions made by MPs. This source is valuable for understanding the official stance and arguments presented by different political figures on migrant labour exploitation.

### **3.8.2. Political Party Websites and Election Manifestos**

These sources offer insights into the policies and promises made by political parties. Election manifestos are particularly useful as they outline the party's agenda and commitments if they come into power. Analysing these can help gauge how different parties plan to address migrant labour issues.

### 3.8.3. Press Releases by Relevant MPs

Press releases are official statements issued by MPs to communicate their views, actions, and responses to specific issues. They can provide up-to-date information on the stance of individual MPs or parties on migrant labour exploitation.

### 3.8.4. Interviews or Reportage in Media Articles

Media articles, including interviews with MPs or experts, offer a more nuanced perspective. They can highlight public opinion, provide expert analysis, and reveal how the issue is being portrayed and discussed in the media. The below Table shows how many sources of each type have been analysed and how many texts in total:

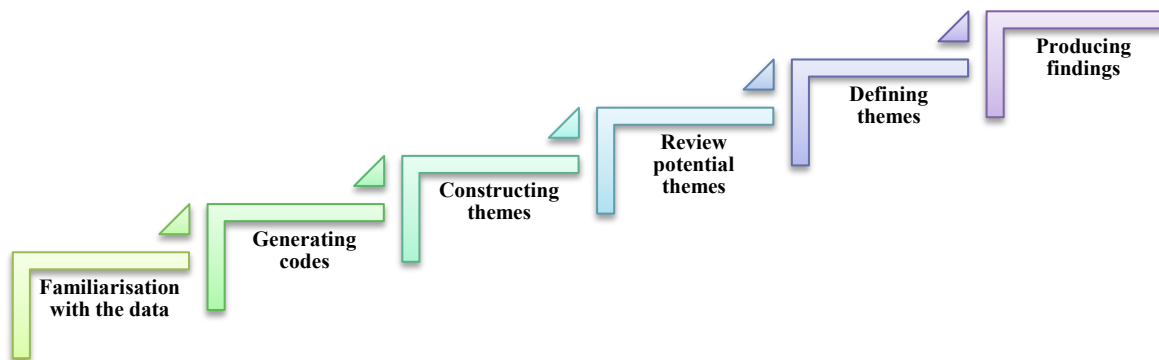
Sources	Number of sources
Parliamentary debates (Hansard)	3
Political party websites and election manifestos	4
Press releases by relevant MPs	National Party: 6 Labour Party: 5 Green Party: 1 ACT: 2
Select committee reports	2
Interviews or reportage in media articles	7

*Table 3.3: Data sources*

## 3.9. Data Analysis

The data collected from these different sources was analysed using thematic analysis. According to Terry et al. (2017), thematic analysis systematically locates, organises, and interprets different themes within the data streams, which makes it well-suited to identify the broad arguments and perspectives that influence policies related to migrant exploitation. The thematic analysis of the data was performed using six phases mentioned in Terry et al. (2017) and Braun and Clark (2006) (refer to Figure 3.1). Unlike other qualitative analysis approaches, these scholars highlight that thematic analysis is not a linear process but an iterative one that allows the researcher to move forward and backward between each of the phases. It is expected that shared

values and assumptions of various political parties in New Zealand will offer insights into why successive governments have not taken significant action against migrant labour exploitation. The six phases are summarised below.



*Figure 3.1 Thematic analysis steps defined in and Braun and Clark (2006) and Terry et al. (2017)*

### **3.9.1. Data Familiarisation**

When the researcher is immersed in the data, it is said to be familiarisation with the data. This allows the researcher to engage with the dataset to identify patterns or ask questions after reading the dataset instead of merely reading the data, similar to reading an interesting novel (Byrne, 2022). In this study, data familiarisation was done by reading and re-reading all the data while making notes. This process leads to temporary analytical ideas by continuously asking questions about the data, emphasising the research questions. For example, I asked questions:

- How does each party describe “migrant labour” in their press releases, speeches or manifestos?
- What policy solutions does each party propose (or omit) when discussing exploitation?
- How do they justify the need for migrant labour in general?

- What values or interests underlie their statements—economic growth, social justice, national identity?
- Do they mention any past or ongoing controversies—like wage-theft scandals, housing-accommodation complaints, or visa-lock-in debates—and how do they position themselves in those stories?

### **3.9.2. Coding the Data**

Familiarisation allows the development of an overall sense of the data. The next phase is to generate codes. This means attaching specific labels to different segments of the dataset (Terry et al., 2017). However, these segments must be related to the research questions. Coding requires focusing on a specific data segment and then attaching a word or short phrase that defines that data segment. For example, quotes such as “the industry has forecast an additional 2,500 workers will be needed for the upcoming season” from politicians of different parties are the segment, and a code that can be attached to this segment is “labour shortage” (Woodhouse & Tolley, Increase in seasonal workers for RSE, 2016). Thus, coding helps to define the main idea of various dataset segments.

### **3.9.3. Constructing Themes**

Familiarisation with the dataset and identifying themes helps to develop an in-depth understanding of the dataset to pave the foundation for developing themes. The initial engagement of data familiarisation (such as asking questions like “why does the government value migrant labour?”) was useful in this phase. The research questions guided what was seen as relevant and what was irrelevant in the dataset, helping to define the themes. This allowed determining what data segments are relevant. To develop a theme, Terry et al. (2017) advises that researchers should review the themes to check if they can be combined into one theme or if a broader theme can be broken down into two or more themes. For example, in this study a broad theme (‘benefits of seasonal migrant labour’) was broken down to develop two themes: ‘economic growth’ and ‘industry needs’.

### **3.9.4. Review of Themes**

The themes finalised were reviewed before defining and analysing them (Byrne, 2022). There were two ways to review the themes. One is to review them at the code level to ensure that each

theme has developed a meaningful segment of the data. Another is to review the themes through the entire dataset. This phase merged some sub-themes under one theme. For example, regulatory complexity and weak enforcement were grouped into one theme, ‘limits of government interventions’, while moving ‘exporting earnings’ from the ‘industry demand’ theme to ‘economic growth’.

### **3.9.5. Themes Definition**

This step requires researchers to adopt an interpretive approach rather than being summative (considering themes as lists). It began by briefly defining the theme in a way that is clear, concise, and concrete. Terry et al. (2017) advised defining each as an abstract. In this study, the first paragraph explaining each theme defines its core idea and meaning, like an abstract for an article. This informs whether there was sufficient depth and richness in the theme to cover it in detail. However, narrow themes are still retained rather than discarded. Instead, the researcher reviewed the dataset, quotes, and codes again to ensure it could be expanded.

### **3.9.6. Producing Findings**

The final phase requires writing up the themes in a cohesive narrative, weaving them together into a compelling story rather than presenting them as a mere list of ideas. However, it is discussed separately because the final writing process allows the researcher to refine the theme by again going back to the dataset. The aim here was to put together data and critical analysis in a single output that answers the research questions (Byrne, 2022). Qualitative data analysis often includes extracts of the data. Terry et al. (2017) define two ways to use the extracts. The first is to use illustratively, which means extracts are used as examples within the overall analysis. The second approach is analytical, in which some parts of the larger quotes mentioned that form the basis of the analytical claim. This study adopted both approaches because it is difficult to blur the line between the two. Some quotes of the politicians were used illustratively, while others were used analytically.

The next chapter will analyse and summarise discourse of political and non-political actors including industry experts and academics to identify how they represent the SML issue. Key themes emerging from the literature will be unfolded to address the research questions.

## Chapter 4: Findings

### 4.3. Context

The existing scholarship on migrant labour exploitation warns that poor oversight, employer dependence, and subcontracting arrangements leave Seasonal Migrant Labour (SML) susceptible to unpaid wages, debt bondage, and coercion (Bi, 2016; Stringer & Michailova, 2019; Yuan et al., 2014). More recent statements from political and non-political actors in New Zealand confirm that the claims mentioned in the literature are still relevant.

Regulatory monitoring of SML schemes in New Zealand is limited and reactive. Jason Perry, national manager of investigation at Immigration New Zealand (INZ) accepts that while the agency has a suite of sanctions (warnings, accreditation suspensions, and prosecutions), it implements them only “where there is sufficient evidence and it is considered to be in the public interest” (Bonnett G. , 2024a). This means that many exploitative employers avoid legal proceedings. The risk is increased by the trust-based model of accreditation. Immigration lawyer Alastair McClymont connects the problem to the AEWV, a system he labels a “free-for-all”. Employers can demonstrate “financial sustainability” with as little as a \$1 profit in each of two years, then on-sell “job tokens” for \$30,000 apiece whereas INZ delays any audit for 24 months, sufficient time to perpetrate harm before detection (Bonnett, 2024b). Former INZ investigator (overseeing serious offences) Cam Bower explains the outcome as a “compliance vacuum” in which structured crime networks benefit from job-selling and under-the-table payments, yet laments that “we do nothing ... to provide a deterrent” (Bonnett G. , 2024a).

From workers’ perspective, these structural weaknesses enable significant dependency and debt bondage. Equal Employment Opportunities Commissioner Saunoamaali‘i Karanina Sumeo reports on RSE workers who, after deductions for air tickets, tools, and overstated rent, take home “as little as \$100 a week” (Johnston, 2022), leaving them too extensively indebted to leave exploitative jobs or return home. Bower connects worker exploitation to wider white-collar crime, stating that worker abuse is often linked to money-laundering, tax evasion, or sham invoicing (Bonnett G. , 2024a). These evidence mirror earlier claims in the literature, such as

employer dependency, fragile enforcement, and subcontracting chains (Bi, 2016; Stringer & Michailova, 2019; Yuan et al., 2014).

MPs of different political parties have acknowledged these gaps but have not yet done anything to close them. For example, in 2018, Labour Immigration Minister Iain Lees-Galloway admitted that “too few checks and balances on employers” (Lees-Galloway, 2018) were facilitating exploitation, yet subsequent reforms still depend extensively on employer self-declaration and deferred verification. Limited and trust-based regulatory architecture and after-the-fact law enforcement allow abuse to persist in the workplace despite recognition of the problem by officials and a large body of literature that provides evidence of its social and economic costs.

These multiple voices confirm the central claim developed in Chapter 2 above: that structural elements of New Zealand’s temporary-migration system (tethered visas, limited inspection, and profit-based labour brokerage) consistently lead to the exploitation of SML. The findings presented in this Chapter examine how political actors associated with major New Zealand political parties respond to the vulnerabilities that SML faces.

To systematically analyse the claims associated with New Zealand political parties, this thesis performed a thematic analysis focusing on official public statements made by these actors, including in parliamentary debates, press releases, and media interviews. Each source was read line-by-line, coded and then grouped into higher-order categories. An iterative analysis based on continuous re-reading of texts was refined into five key themes:

- SML as Necessary for Economic Growth
- SML as Necessary to Meet Industry Demands
- SML and Benefits to Workers, their Families and Countries
- SML as a Barrier to New Zealand Workers
- SML as a Site of Exploitation

Each theme, and the codes associated with them, will be thoroughly analysed in the rest of this Chapter. Each theme is explained using three steps: (1) summary of the core narrative of the theme, (2) presentation of the political narratives that constitute this narrative, and (3) analysis of those narratives. This structure enables the reader to understand how each political party frames

the SML paradigm. Table 4.1 provides an overview of the five themes and their associated codes. These themes and codes are explained in detail in the sections below the table.

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Descriptor</b>	<b>Code</b>
SML Necessary for Economic Growth	Frames the RSE scheme as a macroeconomic key that increases export earnings and gross domestic product.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SML as Important Contributor to Export Earnings – highlights that billions earned from fruit, wine and flowers rely on SML.</li> <li>• SML Supports Economic Recovery – argues that larger RSE visas leads to rapid recovery from external shocks, such as COVID-19 or others.</li> </ul>
SML Necessary to Meet Industry Demands	Considers SML as a practical solution to overcome labour shortages for growers and other key sectors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Industry Needs as Key Driver of Policy – cap sizes increase depending on the forecasts of industry.</li> <li>• SML is Necessary to Meet Industry Needs – Limited labour supply requires SML to meet production and export needs.</li> </ul>
SML and Benefits to Workers, their Families and Countries	Treats RSE as a development instrument that increases Pacific standard of living and develops goodwill between New Zealand and Pacific countries.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development and Remittance Benefits – “Feel Good” – stresses that cash remit to home reduce poverty.</li> <li>• Skill Transfer and Social Capital – emphasising New Zealand training and community ties benefit workers.</li> <li>• Strategic Pacific Partnerships – connect the RSE scheme to</li> </ul>

SML as a Barrier to New Zealand Workers	RSE scheme must not displace local labour and determines conditions to prove it.	<p>diplomatic moves (PACER-Plus, partnerships with Pacific countries).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Balancing Migrant Labour with Jobs for New Zealanders – promises that local will be prioritised before SML.</li> <li>• Training Local Workers – model MSD-industry programme to benefit local people.</li> <li>• Policy Tools to Achieve Balance – median wage floors and labour-market tests for SML.</li> </ul>
SML as a Site of Exploitation	Raises structural issues (tethered visas, poor housing conditions and debt) that permit abuse.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Restricted Mobility &amp; Power Imbalance – critiques employer-based visa that exploit workers.</li> <li>• Poor Living &amp; Working Conditions – Overcrowding and sub-standard housing.</li> <li>• Countervailing Critiques – Cheap Labour and Coercion – Green party and labour union consider RSE scheme as low-wage and fear-based.</li> <li>• Political Debate over Extent of Exploitation – politicians assume that exploitation is minimal and assumes it as enforcement anomaly instead structural issue.</li> </ul>

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*Table 4.1: Themes and codes descriptors*

#### **4.4. Theme 1: SML as Necessary for Economic Growth**

Theme 1 positions the RSE scheme and relevant visa categories for migrant workers as a macroeconomic tool that boosts exports, cushions against external shocks (such as COVID-19), and increases regional wealth. The narrative is associated with parties across the political spectrum. National Party ministers note the link between “record” horticulture returns and larger SML visas (McClay & Grigg, 2025; NZP, 2024a), Labour centres RSE workers as “the single largest economic-based border exception” (O'Connor & Faafoi, 2020). Migrants are framed as key production factors that allow political parties to justify higher visa volume, swift visas, and cutting compliance costs. In fact, the growth argument justifies continued (or even expanded) SML flows while refusing the proposals for tighter regulation (such as employer union vetting or robust labour-market tests) since those measures would threaten the profitability of growers. The codes associated with this theme, outlined in Table 4.1, are discussed below:

##### **4.4.1. SML as an Important Contributor to Export Earnings**

Right-leaning parties and politicians, notably National Party MPs, use export earnings as a key narrative for backing recognised seasonal employers and justifying the intake of seasonal migrant labour. Michael Woodhouse (former Immigration Minister) announced “increase of 1,000 RSE workers... to grow and maximise export returns” and highlighted the “\$5 billion export earnings” of the horticulture and viticulture industries in 2016 (Woodhouse & Tolley, 2016). This sets the baseline for the National’s argument that more seasonal workers equal more export or foreign exchange. Almost a decade later, National’s Todd McClay and Nicola Grigg updated the export figures including “kiwifruit (Zespri) earned over NZ\$5 billion 31% increase on the previous year”, “direct growers returns have topped \$3 billion for the first time” and the horticultural industry “revenue is set to reach \$8 billion in 2024/25” (McClay & Grigg, 2025). Focusing on the growth narrative, National MPs argue that high kiwifruit and broader horticulture earnings will increase if growers have easy access to labour. Todd McClay informed Parliament that “RSE numbers must be increased to achieve horticulture industry targets” (NZP, 2024). Likewise, Erica Stanford increased the RSE cap to 20,750 to achieve industry demand (Stanford & Peters, 2024). The export figures justifies the expansion of SML inflows and avoiding tight labour market-tests.

Academics also support these narratives. For example, Waikato Professor John Gibson reported a “significant jump” increase in apple, kiwifruit, and wine exports after introducing the RSE scheme (Gibson, 2019). The political narrative makes export earnings a yardstick to measure seasonal labour impact while the industry narrative makes National’s narrative a technocratic veneer sidelining the labour rights objections.

New Zealand’s two major political parties (National and Labour) both consider export earnings supremely important, and see migrant labour as an important part of achieving export earnings. National views seasonal labour as instrumental to the economy. For instance, Todd McClay expressed his ambition to “increase the number of Recognised Seasonal Employer places to allow horticultural production to grow” and “by extension boost our largest export sector” (NZP, 2021). The National Party’s recent Primary Sector Growth Plan backs this logic, aiming to double the RSE cap to 38,000 in the next five years due to its “improving access to workers” board (National, 2023). These narratives reframe the RSE scheme as a productivity shift, meaning that more workers means more fruits in containers, thereby more foreign revenue.

Labour supports the same growth discourse but it blankets that message in crisis-management – positioning additional SML as an urgent solution to labour shortages – and reciprocity arguments (SML as benefiting both New Zealand and the Pacific countries). This is evident in Michael Wood’s endeavour to increase the SML cap by 3,000 in 2022, calling it “a 19 percent increase...that acknowledges the industry’s current needs based on strong growth,” while emphasising that the increase was done on a “tri-partite” basis with unions and include strict worker-welfare regulations (O’Connor & Faafoi, 2020). The core message is that seasonal migration is not only tolerable but necessary when crops mature or external shocks like the pandemic threaten exports, provided that employers make efforts to improve wages, accommodation conditions, and opportunities for New Zealanders.

Industry voices also support the role of SML to achieve exports. Kiwifruit Growers’ chief executive Colin Bond appreciates the coalition government’s 2024 endeavours, particularly National’s (2023) Growth Plan as “positive”, since SML is seen as an underlying element of the farm workforce portfolio (Steele, 2025). Further, veteran apple agronomist John Bostock argues that higher SML volumes are necessary otherwise “tens of millions of dollars of the crop will be

wasted” (CountryLife, 2018). These narratives support the idea that horticulture (and by implication the New Zealand economy) may struggle if Pacific workers are not welcomed.

In this code, SML is linked to New Zealand’s export efforts, primarily with the horticulture production, to legitimise and relax the RSE and AEWV schemes instead of tightening them. National uses the export argument to justify higher visa volume and feasible rules and Labour defends imported labour when growth is slow. The debates focused on two issues: (1) how many precarious SML workers New Zealand admits and (2) how quickly they arrive in New Zealand.

#### **4.4.2. SML Supports Economic-Recovery**

National argues that SML is important to “rebuild the economy”. Immigration Minister Erica Stanford considers visa policy as a macroeconomic lever: “Getting our immigration settings right is critical to this Government’s plan to rebuild the economy” (Stanford, 2024b). Her press release calls for immediate changes to increase the number of skill visas which signal that a larger, agile RSE channel is crucial to the horticulture and viticulture growth. This is reinforced by the same rationale of Michael Woodhouse’s 2017 reforms: immigration must “best support the economy and the labour market”, with measures adjusted to fulfil “genuine skill shortages” and continuously increase the output (Woodhouse M. , 2017a). Gerry Brownlee clarified the logic: as the programme “has been so successful,” Cabinet assigned \$10 million for five years to study how the RSE model can be applied to “other sectors of the economy where there is continued high demand for labour” (Woodhouse & Brownlee, 2017). These narratives make seasonal workers a key production factor that can be increased whenever agriculture exports (or the balance of payments) need a lift. However, the question of worker welfare is not addressed in these statements.

Labour used a similar “economic recovery” argument but added a public-health and reciprocity frame. During the COVID-19 border lockdown, Immigration Minister Kris Faafoi defended the government’s decision to grant a border-entry for RSE horticulture workers – even though Managed Isolation and Quarantine (MIQ) spaces were severely restricted for returning citizens – because horticulture is a “significant cash crop” important to support New Zealand’s post-pandemic economic recovery (NZP, 2020). After one week he confirmed the quantity (2,000) and schedule of the Pacific migrant workers, emphasising that they would land “in time for next year’s harvest season” but they would not receive incentives that local job-seekers are entitled to

(O'Connor & Faafoi, 2020). Therefore, Labour considers SML essential for ensuring consistency of export revenues. These inflows, however, were ethically acceptable only if safety measures are in place, such as quarantine, guaranteed living-wages, and evidence that employers have prioritised recruiting New Zealanders in the first place. Faafoi's colleague Damien O'Connor cast the RSE scheme in the same vein, describing it as "a pragmatic solution" to equalise labour needs with MIQ constraints and broader public-health priorities (NZP, 2021). These narratives demonstrate Labour's perspective that well-managed seasonal migration is vital to protect export earnings during turmoils, as long as it achieves mutual goals and blanket health-and-safety guarantees.

While National and Labour frame the SML issue differently, grower organisations publicly support whichever narrative advances their core interest which is guaranteed labour supply. Kiwifruit leader Nikki Johnson considered the 2020 border exception "a really good start" that likely provide frames a "lift in productivity," whereas BusinessNZ noted it would be "devastating to let fruit rot on the ground" if worker flows were restricted (1News, 2020). HortNZ chief Mike Chapman depicted that: timely picking "has an enormous contribution to make to New Zealand's economic recovery" because export fruit earns premium prices (HNZ, 2020a). These endorsements support the political message that considered migrants, not a social concession but an important economic need.

Generally, National focuses on bringing more SML, while Labour also accepts higher SML volume but emphasises improving health and wages. Growers also consider high supply of SML as a positive step for the horticulture industry. Thus, politicians legitimise continued (and extended) dependence on SML.

#### **4.5. Theme 2: SML as Necessary to Meet Industry Needs**

This theme considers SML as an appropriate response to the skill gap and labour scarcity in rapidly growing industries, such as horticulture, viticulture, and construction. Again, it is not the narrative of a particular party, and National, Labour, and ACT all stressed their commitment to getting "workers on the ground" when industry-specific deadlines are approaching. Industry voices also actively support the political sense of urgency. As this theme portrays SML as an essential gap-filler, it also legitimises policies that increase SML visa volume, reduce visa hurdles, and ease labour market tests. Regulations that may affect recruitment (for example,

union inspection at accreditation or tighter compliance audits) are represented as costly and a risk to the competitiveness of key industries.

#### **4.5.1. Industry Needs as Key Driver of Policy**

National's basic position is that when an industry faces labour shortages that threaten production, the government must increase the arrival of immigrants so that production and export earnings are not affected. In 2015, Michael Woodhouse praised Filipino tradespeople for their crucial role in rebuilding Canterbury post-earthquake. During, Woodhouse's tenure 5,614 visas were issued out of which 2,568 visas were issued to Filipino workers (Woodhouse M. , 2015a). In 2017, National supported bespoke visa schemes for industries facing "continued high demand for labour" (as stated by Brownlee in one of the press releases) moving focus from importing workers to replicating the RSE scheme to other sectors (Woodhouse & Brownlee, 2017). And in 2024, National increased the annual RSE cap, adding 1,250 extra workers in 2024/25 for the horticulture industry. Thus, National argues that labour shortage is an input risk that can be overcome by increasing visa numbers.

ACT leader David Seymour also amplified industry calls, asking "Why did the Government wait until crops such as strawberries and courgettes had rotted on the ground before letting these 2,000 RSE workers in?" (NZP, 2020). The urgency to prevent wastage constructed a staffing shortage and suggested that urgently recruiting Pacific workers was the only cogent response. The crisis was considered ethical as well as economic, since allowing crops to rot breached a broader societal duty of stewardship (Hogan, 2021). In addition, restricting the entry of RSE workers mean forgone earnings for these workers and their families to pay school fees, household expenses, and other necessities. Thus, ACT portrays labour shortfall as tangible and monetary loss, justifying the faster and larger intake of SML.

Agreeing with the premise that industries experience "genuine labour shortages", former Labour Party Minister Iain Lees-Galloway stated in 2018 that the Coalition government is "determined to make our Immigration system work better for New Zealand business and regions" (Lees-Galloway, 2018). Before this press release, Lees-Galloway increased the RSE cap and allowed 1,750 more Pacific pickers to enter New Zealand, praising the scheme as a "ground-breaking initiative" and claiming that "orchards have increased in value by around 70 per cent each and the 2018 wine vintage was 2.6 percent larger than the previous year... forecasting 2,600 more

workers are needed” (Sepuloni & Lees-Galloway, 2018). Thus, Labour constructs SML as a targeted safety-valve when growth outpaces domestic labour and training but there is uncertainty.

At the same time, Labour argues that collaboration, skills development, and good conditions create a trusting relationship. In 2022, Labour announced an increase in the RSE cap as their immigration Minister Michael Wood emphasised that officials had “worked closely with horticulture and wine sectors to ensure we strike the right balance (O'Connor & Wood, 2022). While acknowledging labour shortfall concerns in key industries and supporting government action to fulfil industry needs, Labour has a more balanced position, also noting the responsibilities of workers to those workers.

Both the National and Labour represent industry needs as central. They are fulfilling industrial demands to achieve export targets and protect regional economies. However, they (and especially Labour) give limited attention to worker rights or to the impact on domestic workers.

#### **4.5.2. SML is Necessary to Meet Industry Needs**

In 2017, National MP Michael Woodhouse set out two related but distinct positions: (1) industries demand low to semi-skilled employees that local pool of candidates cannot fulfil and (2) immigration can fill the labour shortage gap. In 2017, he proposed a blueprint stating that “fast-growing industries like viticulture, horticulture ... often need more experienced people than a small country can immediately provide... And that’s where immigration can help...” He argues, further, that part of the demand “will need to be met from overseas... now and likely for the foreseeable future” (Woodhouse M. , 2017b). Several years later, National Party leader Christopher Luxon supported the RSE policy in a succinct narrative on RNZ (2024), arguing New Zealand should “double the amount of RSE workers...from 19 000 up to about 38 000” so orchards will continue to invest with confidence. In this narrative training and recruitment of local workers might have a political and moral importance, but it cannot cover time-critical gaps, making SML the pressure-release valve. Further, National justifies high number of RSE workers by framing abuse as a rare event which can be managed by punishing employers who involved in exploitation without the need of redesigning visa schemes (Woodhouse M. , 2017c).

In 2018, Labour MP Iain Lees-Galloway described the RSE as a “ground-breaking initiative” that addresses labour demand “in some of New Zealand’s most important industries”, noting that those “shortages are expected to continue, with growers forecasting 2,600 more workers will be needed” (Sepuloni & Lees-Galloway, 2018). Lees-Galloway considered SML and the RSE scheme as indispensable solutions to overcome existing labour gaps. By referencing industry forecasts of 2,600 additional seasonal workers being needed, Lees-Galloway justifies the RSE scheme based on industry projection, portraying SML as an indispensable solution to achieve export growth and regional prosperity.

The ACT party proposes the replacement of visa categories with a price-levy policy to reduce administrative hurdles and allow employers to fill urgent labour shortages within minimum time, thereby meeting industry demands. This is evident in David Seymour’s statement “to bring talented human resource with minimum rigmarole” (RNZ, 2022). He further stated that “the existing rules and regulations are complex so immigration must be streamlined so that businesses can easily access skilled human resource” (RNZ, 2022). This policy allows employers to conduct cost-benefit analysis and identify whether hiring locally or importing labour is beneficial. However, Seymour also stated that “New Zealand is a small market and needs access to overseas employees to meet labour demand” (RNZ, 2022). While ACT’s position is directed to immigration generally and not to SML specifically, it indirectly affects SML by increasing access to seasonal labour and emphasising a price signal instead of labour-market tests.

Industry experts also support these political narratives. Chief executive of Kiwifruit Growers Colin Bond stated that “The labour for our industry is made up of quite a few components...obviously the RSE scheme...and recent changes from the Government have been positive” (Steele, 2025). Economist John Gibson also favours the RSE scheme by stating that Pacific pickers are 22-54% more efficient than local contract workers and 82% more than backpackers (Steele, 2025). These metrics support the premise that importing seasonal workers is not just a stop-gap but a way to improve productivity, justifying higher visa volume.

The above sub-theme normalises increase in the number of SML (representing worker shortfall as structural which means it will continue) and develops the ground to import more labour in the future. The sub-theme also directs attention away from alternative fixes (e.g. wage increases or training to attract local workers) that are presented as too slow or uncertain. Finally, its focus on

industry needs make exploitation a separate issue that can be dealt later and should not curb recruitment.

In different ways, minor parties such as Green Party, New Zealand First, and Te Pāti Māori oppose the narratives of major political parties regarding SML. For example, Green Party MP Ricardo Menéndez March argues that bringing in workers on the terms of employers will reduce wages and affect working conditions (March, 2024a). Likewise, other minor parties may argue for better pay and conditions and training New Zealand workers. Overall, Theme 2 backs the free flow of migrant workers and places the burden of proof on those who suggests closer screening, union vetting, or stringent labour-market tests.

#### **4.6. Theme 3: SML and Benefits to Workers, their Families and Countries**

While Themes 1 and 2 focus on the benefits of SML to the New Zealand economy and New Zealand firms, Theme 3 positions the RSE scheme as a development tool that offers benefits to a wider range of stakeholders. As well as offering incomes to workers and their families, SML schemes are said to develop skills and bolster New Zealand’s diplomatic relationships with Pacific countries. In other words, Theme 3 constructs the RSE and AEWV schemes not as self-interested but as win-win arrangements. Both Labour and National adopt this perspective – Labour Ministers state “helping our pacific neighbours” (NZP, 2020) with remittances whereas National focuses on training and long-term “strong relationships” (Woodhouse & Brownlee, 2017) notably with workers that choose to work in New Zealand again. ACT hardly opposes this premise and business submissions also support these narratives (MoFAT, 2025). These narratives cast SML as empowered recipients instead of vulnerable workers, normalising larger visas and quick visa procedures, while tight regulations or union involvement are represented as obstacles for life-changing chances for Pacific people. Thus, this theme supports the ongoing (and possible future expansion) of recruitment of Pacific workers, considering better compliance as hurdles rather than essential protective measures.

##### **4.6.1. Development and Remittance Benefits**

National MPs promote the RSE scheme’s contribution to Pacific communities. Michael Woodhouse appreciated the scheme for “RSE workers send more than 40% of their income averaging between \$4,600 and \$5,500” (Woodhouse, 2015). This statement positions SML

incomes as playing a key role in regional growth and development. Further, Prime Minister Christopher Luxon stretches focus from foreign exchange to human capital, informing Papua New Guinea leaders that the RSE scheme allows migrant workers to “learn a set of skills ... and ultimately bring [them] back here to Papua New Guinea,” (RNZ, 2024) reflecting that circular migration can help develop skills. The result is a moral dividend that justifies National’s argument to increase number of SML (as more immigrants come to New Zealand they will send more foreign exchange to their countries and gain more knowledge, framing expansion as a regional partnership rather than cheap labour for the benefit of New Zealand.

During the COVID-19 border closure debate, Labour’s Kris Faafoi emphasised that Pacific labour would be “paid at least \$22.10 per hour” and that this wage “helps support New Zealand’s Pacific Island neighbours ... as their seasonal workers provide important remittances back to their homelands” (NZP, 2020). In the same press release, Faafoi mentioned that RSE allows critical skills “not only ... to be filled, but compensated at a fair wage”, showing the policy not only as a developmental instrument but also as fulfilling an ethical labour-standards framework.

Cabinet briefings regularly highlight rising per-worker transfers. For example, MBIE estimates annual Pacific remittances at more than \$40 million and forecasts that development impact will increase in the future as volumes rise (DoL, 2008). According to MoFAT (2025), Pacific workers remitted a total of around NZ\$852 million (including RSE remittances) from New Zealand, providing quantitative support to these narratives. These promising remittances benefits strengthen the “feel-good” argument and leave behind questions regarding the opportunity cost of using temporary visas instead of strengthening long-term mobility pathways: the “developmental and remittance benefits” argument set aside welfare critiques.

In articulating this code, actors from both major political parties did not acknowledge the costs suffered by workers (debt-financed airfares, tied visas, family separation). Major political parties argue that remittances benefit Pacific families and economies, masking problems such as exploitation, lack of unions and low wages. The Green Party, New Zealand First, and Te Pāti Māori do not support these narratives. The Greens are particularly focused on exploitation instead of benefits and this is the reason they not appear in this sub-theme.

This sub-theme frames SML (and the RSE and AEWV schemes that facilitate it) as a win-win proposition. Ministers justify higher visas as acts of humanitarian generosity instead of simply fulfilling employer demand. These benefits divert attention away from tethered visas or meagre enforcement. In sum, this sub-theme argues for policy inertia: RSE is considered as economic prosperity instrument, thus diverting attention from issues like seasonal employees' pathways to residence or portable permits.

#### **4.6.2. Skill Transfer and Social Capital**

National MP Gerry Brownlee extends the benefit of SML to workers and their communities from monetary value (as discussed in 4.4.1) to social capital building. On the 10th anniversary of the RSE scheme, Brownlee promoted the scheme as an incubator for skills development by announcing “\$5 million for the training of Pacific workers in New Zealand” (Woodhouse & Brownlee, 2017). The RSE scheme is bundled with a formal economic treaty to make temporary migration a capacity-building initiative that will “improve Pacific economies” when workers return to their home countries. In the same press release, Brownlee also emphasised the development of opportunities for “Pacific women in semi-skilled roles” (Woodhouse & Brownlee, 2017), reflecting the government's intention to extend the training initiative beyond fruit picking.

This theme is associated only with actors from the National Party: it does not include statements from Labour or Green Party. This is because Labour mostly emphasises fair wages while the Greens focus on labour exploitation. This absence indicates that National owns the skills transfer and social capital narrative and uses it as part of its argument for visa volume and sector-by-sector expansion.

#### **4.6.3. Strategic Pacific Partnerships**

National positions SML flows as creating a strategic partnership with Pacific countries. Michael Woodhouse argues that Pacific labour contributes “more than \$40 million every year to the Pacific” (Woodhouse & Brownlee, 2017). This statement presents remittances as a macro-level benefit, framing the RSE scheme as a mutually beneficial programme in which New Zealand achieves economic targets (exports and industry production) while Pacific countries earn foreign exchange, improving connections and diplomatic goodwill between New Zealand and Pacific countries. Michael Woodhouse extends the partnership perspective by stating that “At the heart

of the scheme's success are the strong relationships that have been forged ... with the highly valued Pacific workers who are welcomed into our communities each year" (Woodhouse & Brownlee, 2017). Woodhouse's statement emphasises that long-time networks between growers, agencies, and island governments prove that the programme is not just for recruiting transactional labour, but that it also establishes a community-to-community partnership that builds trust and recurrent participation.

Actors who articulate this code do not evaluate whether the pledged skills are actually portable or whether community "relationships" transfer into bargaining power for workers. The remittances numbers, although striking, conceal debt-financing, the costs of migration, and increased dependency on below par livelihoods. These issues are absent from the statements that constitute this code.

#### **4.7. Theme 4: SML as a Barrier to New Zealand Workers**

While Themes 1-3 are broadly supportive of schemes that enable SML flows, Themes 4 and 5 emphasise the limitations and problems of these schemes. Theme 4 incorporates the narrative that SML policy is a threat to domestic workers. National, Labour, and New Zealand First are in broad agreement that "New Zealanders must be at the front of the line" (Woodhouse & Brownlee, 2017), stressing that companies should only seek SML after seeking local workers. In practice, National (and sometimes Labour) uses the labour shortage argument to increase SML flows – removing RSE caps, establishing wage floors, and conducting labour-market tests to protect against displacements (Woodhouse & Brownlee, 2017). Labour represents this as "balanced growth" along with worker protection (O'Connor & Wood, 2022). New Zealand First emphasises labour-market tests, compliance, and training local workers before importing labour (MBIE, 2018b). This theme justifies restriction of SML flows through labour-market tests, higher wage floors, and industry training schemes for domestic workers, and the use of regulatory levers, such as skill-shortage lists, and remuneration and residency caps before employers bring overseas workers. Although the parties diverge on where the threshold lies, the consensus is that unregulated inflows can affect wages, strain housing and develop a "back-door" to permanent migration (RNZ, 2015). Unlike the developmental theme (Theme 3), Theme 4 puts the burden of proof on industry to demonstrate genuine shortfalls, thereby tempering both the volume and pace of migrants.

#### **4.7.1. Balancing SML with Jobs for New Zealanders**

To support increase in the RSE cap, National attempts to construct a balance between local hiring and imported labour. For example, in one press release Woodhouse (2017b) articulated the need for balance between SML and local workers, stating that “We can and do train New Zealanders for those roles, but part of that employment demand will need to be met from overseas”. He further mentioned that increase in RSE cap is necessary to “enable the industry to continue to grow ... while ensuring jobs aren’t being taken from New Zealanders” (Woodhouse & Tolley, 2016). In 2024, Erica Stanford (National’s new immigration minister) re-stated this narrative and overhauled the AEWV scheme, claiming that doing so would “ensure that New Zealanders are put to the front of the line for jobs where there are no skills shortages ... [and] better test the local labour market, reducing the risks of putting New Zealanders out of work” (Stanford, 2024b). Focusing on English language requirements and work and income rules, the coalition argued that SML should be a last resort, not the first option. Thus, National balance their narrative by adopting a “local-first” stance, claiming that employers must prioritise local candidates before importing labour. However, it also justified SML unless the industries needed more workers.

Labour argues that an increase in SML numbers can be considered when industries demonstrate that they have tried and exhausted with local recruitment options. This reinforces the idea that SML will fill genuine labour shortages and not replace New Zealand workers. Labour MP Carmel Sepuloni (former Social Development Minister) pointed to Turners & Growers’ Hawke’s Bay orchard as the gold standard for balancing local workers and SML, as they recruited thousands of New Zealanders, offered flexible hours and pastoral care, and reported growing profits (Sepuloni & Lees-Galloway, 2018). Sepuloni’s message was that RSE recruits would increase only if growers could show willingness (or actual progress) in recruiting New Zealanders. Labour stated its plan to partner with MSD and increase wages or accommodation so that horticulture would appear attractive to locals.

#### **4.7.2. Training Local Workers**

National’s Anne Tolley (former Social Development Minister) announced the 2016 increase in the RSE cap by stressing that “the Ministry of Social Development is developing new initiatives with employers and other stakeholders to further increase the number of New Zealanders

working in the industry” (Woodhouse & Tolley, 2016). Her press release stated that 4,000 SML were working in the horticulture and viticulture industries and that more locals will be recruited in orchards and vineyards through bespoke programmes.

Two years later, Labour’s Carmel Sepuloni (then Social Development Minister) Labour announced another increase in the RSE cap. She held up Turners & Growers’ Hawke’s Bay (discussed above) as evidence that growers can train and retain locals. She stressed that “the Ministry will continue to grow industry partnerships with horticulture businesses that are committed to providing training and jobs for New Zealanders and grow a more skilled domestic workforce” (Sepuloni & Lees-Galloway, 2018). Labour’s position linked larger caps to growers’ willingness to train an adequate number of domestic workers.

While training and recruitment was stressed by both major parties, neither party appeared able to quantify whether these training programmes or local models (such as Turners & Growers) decreased reliance on migrant labour, or whether they overcome the wage and job security issues that discourage local workers. Yet, the Theme still argues that seasonal peaks will fulfil by SML in the “foreseeable future”.

#### **4.8. Theme 5: SML as a Site of Exploitation**

While Theme 4 focuses on the protection of domestic labour, Theme 5 emphasises the darker sides of the RSE and AEWV. These dark undersides include tied visas, sub-standard housing, wage deductions, and lack of action against employers to expose workers to abuse. Although the Green Party is the loudest critic of RSE dangers (highlighting the tendency of employer-tied visas to create a power imbalance and arguing for an overhaul), they are not alone. Labour MPs such as Iain Lees-Galloway acknowledge that poor compliance allows “employers with poor track records” to continue recruiting while a bunch of regulators, lawyers, and unions apply to provide rich evidence of debts, overcrowded housing, and intimidation. Reframing the scheme in terms of worker exploitation instead of economic benefits moves the focus from growth to compliance, opposing arguments that existing light-touch rules are enough.

Since the exploitation theme focuses on harm and rights violations, it supports strict regulations and a reduction in migrant inflows until the condition improves. Proposals to improve conditions

include decoupling visas<sup>3</sup>, increasing union involvement and labour inspection, and conducting audits. These measures either tend to obstruct recruitment and increase costs. Thus, theme 5 hinders the volume of SML and places the burden of proof on industry and politicians that support the RSE scheme to show that they have the solution to reduce or eliminate abuse.

#### **4.8.1. Restricted Mobility & Power Imbalance**

In the report of the 2023 select committee debate on migrant abuse, the Green Party stated that “tying a worker’s visa status to their employer” leads to an unequal bargaining situation that “enables greater exploitation” (NZP, 2023). One year earlier, Teanau Tuiono urged the government to “the RSE scheme needs to be overhauled to put the rights of workers at the heart, because we know workers are being exploited, mistreated and underpaid” (Tuiono & March, 2022a). Later he associated the limited mobility of migrant workers to harms including unpaid overtime, lower housing conditions, and possible deportation if they complain. These harms threaten the livelihoods of workers and their families in the Pacific (March, 2024a).

The Green Party argues that the core reason workers are exploited is because their visas are connected with one firm: “So long as people’s whole livelihoods depend on a single employer this scheme will continue to enable exploitation” (March, 2024b). When migrants are bound in such a way employers have the choice to reduce pay and conditions that never align with competitive salary in the market. The remedy of the Greens is structural (decouple visas) instead of just incremental.

Expert voices support these concerns. For example, Saunoamaali’i Karanina Sumeo (Equal Employment Opportunities Commission) supported Green Party critiques after surveying various orchards in 2022. Sumeo reported a “lack of freedom”, “threats against joining unions” and restricting culture, such as prohibiting drinking kava or going to church (Johnston, 2022). All of these issues emerge due to workers’ dependency on a single employer for both employment and immigration. Sumeo’s human-rights survey extends the focus of exploitation from wage theft to civil-liberty violations, highlighting how visa dependence regulates different aspects of workers’ lives.

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<sup>3</sup> Splitting work visas from particular employers so that migrants have flexibility in switching jobs and reduce potential exploitation.

It is important to note that the two major parties (National and Labour) engage only rarely with the mobility issues. Their statements on worker exploitation emphasise wage floors, cap sizes, or labour inspector resourcing (refer to Themes 2 and 4), while the Greens continue to advocate for morality and ethics evident in its “modern-day slavery” language (March, 2024a), its argument to overhaul RSE to safeguard workers’ rights (Tuiono & March, 2022b), and its campaign to end tied-visa (March, 2023b) and advocate for amnesty for overstayers (Tuiono & March, 2023). The lack of rebuttal clearly confirms the claim of the Greens that portability is still the “untouched third rail” of immigration policies.

The limited mobility debate does not consider SML as a win-win situation but a power disparity built into visa architecture. The Greens and other public agencies noted these disparities, demanding equal rights and strong safeguards. However, National and Labour remain mostly quiet on this Theme, reflecting a gap between acknowledging exploitation and redesigning the rules to facilitate it.

#### **4.8.2. Poor Living & Working Conditions**

The National-led coalition government increased the RSE cap in 2024. The Green’s Ricardo Menendez accused it of also lowering wages and reducing accommodation standards: “The Government is simply happy to bring in workers while literally lowering the standards of that work” (March, 2024a). In the Green Party’s view, larger quotas without any corresponding upgrades with regards to housing or wages are the evidence that exploitation is not a glitch but a deliberate cost-reduction strategy.

Further, Takutai Tarsh Kemp (the late Te Pāti Māori spokesperson for workers’ rights) said: “They’ve introduced changes to the Recognised Seasonal Employer scheme that will deepen the exploitation of migrant workers — workers who already face tough conditions in the orchards and the vineyards of this country” (Kemp, 2025). Kemp’s critique highlights physically demanding work, low piece rate, and low bargaining power of workers. If existing poor conditions are not corrected, they could be exacerbated in the future increasing the social cost as well for workers who have limited legal redress.

Independent watchdogs further support the Green Party’s narrative. Sumeo in her undercover investigation identified several exploitative conditions of Pacific workers in Blenheim. For

example, she reported that workers were housed in congested rooms and charged \$150 a week to sleep in overcrowded, freezing and damp conditions, many of them so ill that they coughed blood and were told to work or buy paracetamol. In one property, the carpet was torn, the ceiling was leaking and heaters provide minimal heating or revoked, and another property housed 11 men (Johnston, 2022). These conditions reflect significant health and safety risks to workers health, mobility, and cultural practices and no labour has pointed out these issues in the recent times.

The above narratives and evidence identified structural issues which lead to poor accommodation, including labour inspector negligence, and tied visas. The evidence in this sub-theme sharply contrasts with the major political rhetoric analysed in Themes 1-3. Those themes mostly focused on productivity, industry demands, and remittances while completely disregarding poor working and living conditions of SML.

#### **4.8.3. Countervailing Critiques – Cheap Labour and Coercion**

Labour MPs occasionally break their silence over the loopholes that exist in the temporary-visa system. Lees-Galloway (2018) accepted that “The current system is overly complex, includes several different visa options, and isn’t adequately responsive to sectoral or regional differences in the labour market”. While Lees-Galloway critique doesn’t endorse the Green Party’s entire redesigning of the temporary-visa system, it acknowledges that different visa categories and exemptions allow low-road operators to cherry-pick the weakest rules whereas credible enforcement is unable to keep up.

Comments made by FIRST Union organiser Antonia Lili’i support these arguments: “When you say migrants, there’s exploitation ... why can’t they have the same standard rates and entitlements that a normal employee in New Zealand is entitled to?” (Steele, 2025). This statement highlights that there is no shortage of labour but rather a shortage of decent and equally remunerated jobs, a key argument that cheap seasonal labour emerges when industries are unable to comply with Kiwi wage expectations.

Union Network of Migrants organiser Mikee Santos described why official hotlines rarely ring: “If you’re a migrant worker there’s an 0800 number ... but it’s not that easy; workers hide their heads because of their visa conditions ... they don’t want to rattle the cage in case they’re not

called back next season” (Steele, 2025). When employees see the risk of losing jobs, the employers take advantage by demanding extra shifts; provide poor accommodation, or making unnecessary deductions.

Green Party MPs and non-political actors take an overt stance against exploitation, providing solutions and criticising the entire system. Meanwhile, Labour MP acknowledge the complexity in the visa architecture, but do not often accept that it leads to exploitation.

#### **4.8.4. Political Debate over the Extent of Exploitation**

The Green Party’s spokesman Ricardo Menéndez March contends that the National-led coalition government has “literally lowering the standards of that work” by increasing the seasonal worker cap on the very same day it reduced wages and housing standards for SML (March, 2024a). The Greens regard such policy changes as intentional social downgrading and unambiguously claim that the RSE scheme is sliding toward “modern-day slavery” (March, 2024a).

Meanwhile, Labour MP Phil Twyford criticises the government’s slow progress in prosecuting migrant complaints against employers. In 2025, Twyford stated that “there were 3,925 reports of exploitation called in by the public, and 812 investigations – however only four prosecutions”. He argues that this “puts New Zealand’s international reputation at risk” (Scoop, 2025). Labour considers SML abuse as a compliance failure: something that can be corrected with labour inspection instead of reforming tied-visa rules. Further, Labour MP Michael Wood stated the need for “working conditions to be improved (for SML)” (O’Connor & Wood, 2022). Labour promised increasing public scrutiny of workers welfare.

National, on the other hand, represents the RSE scheme only in terms of success and benefits. National MPs rarely comment on the exploitation. For example, eight years ago Michael Woodhouse praised RSE as “a shining example of best practice where everyone benefits – employers, RSE workers and their home communities” (Woodhouse M. , 2015b). After two weeks, Woodhouse stressed “stand-down periods” for employers who broke labour law, yet still considered exploitation to be rare and something that could be solved by banning some rogue actors rather than changing the fundamentals of the RSE scheme (Woodhouse M. , 2017c). This narrative focuses on tightening compliance whereas not resolving the core issues (employer-bound visas). Woodhouse returned in 2023 as Immigration Minister and has not issued any

statement on the migrant exploitation issue. This signals that welfare risk is lower in their public construction of SML than productivity gains.

Although the Greens and Labour accept that exploitation exists, National takes a narrow view, typically representing the RSE scheme positively. Green Party and some Labour MPs do accept human rights violations, but National focuses almost entirely on the economic and industry benefits of SML.

#### **4.9. Summary**

New Zealand political parties construct and present the issue of SML in multiple ways. The issue is sometimes articulated with positive outcomes for the economy, local firms, migrant workers and Pacific communities (Themes 1-3) and sometimes with harms for local and migrant workers (Themes 4 and 5). The analysis presented in this Chapter shows that SML exploitation is not a historical artefact but rather remains a systemic problem. The themes identified above (and the parties most associated with different themes) can help explain why successive governments have not taken meaningful action to address SML exploitation. The Education and Workforce Select Committee recommended a modest solution (permitting unions to scrutinise employers before they receive AEWV recognition). However, the National Party commented that: “Involving unions at the accreditation stage ... would add unnecessary complexity, cost, and delay” (NZP, 2023). National’s economically-focussed construction of SML demanded that it resists such calls for change. National argues that unions create costs and bureaucratic “complexity”, and that employers must be accredited using a trust-and-audit model, the very practice that empowers exploitation.

Labour also accepts the contribution of SML, acknowledging the problem of exploitation, and striving for a “balanced approach” – increase SML volume but trying to improve their wellbeing. Labour argues that hard caps will not solve the problem but a median-wage floor for AEWV and sectoral agreements (such as Turners & Growers) that encourage employers to hire local people and improve job conditions to access more migrant labour. Labour’s narrative includes reciprocity: migration can be beneficial if it increases productivity, shields local wages, and reduces or eliminates exploitation using accreditation and pastoral rules.

The Green Party's stance is that SML exploitation is a moral failure rather than just a technical compliance problem. This is evident in The Green Party's narrative, which argues that employer-bound visas cause modern-day slavery, that the RSE scheme requires an overhaul, that enforcement must be enhanced, and that immigration policy should connect with broader justice measures. The Greens' position focuses on improving labour standards, promoting visa portability, and emphasising ethical responsibility. This approach differs from the productivity-first stance of the National and Labour parties.

The ACT Party frames SML exploitation as a regulatory failure. They argue for bringing in SML to avoid rotting crops, fixing regulatory bottlenecks, changing employer-bound visa with a market-based levy, simplifying rules instead of complicating them, and penalising corrupt entities in the system instead of changing the entire system. Thus, the ACT Party wants to ease and increase access to SML by reducing regulatory hurdles.

New Zealand First advocate for local workers instead of SML. Its main target is to increase employment opportunities and improve the wellbeing of local workers. New Zealand First's narrative does not include SML, exploitation or wellbeing concerns.

In summary, the major political parties construct SML as essential to exports, industries, and relationships with Pacific countries. As such, they promote industry and macro-economic interests while de-emphasising the voices of advocates and migrants – creating a power imbalance that frames mistreatment a systemic feature of New Zealand's labour market. Criticisms of SML policy and an emphasis on exploitation are typically restricted to minor parties, especially New Zealand First and the Green Party.

Having summarised in this chapter the multiple ways in which New Zealand political parties construct the issue of SML, the discussion chapter will interpret the narratives, explaining the five themes and assessing how existing visa architecture creates power differences.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

This chapter synthesises how New Zealand politicians represent SML and migrant exploitation. In Chapter 4, using a dataset of political communications (ministerial press releases, Hansard debates, select committee reports, and newspapers), a qualitative thematic analysis was performed, which identified 14 codes categorised into 5 themes. The findings reveal that SML is represented as an economic force that facilitates exports, productivity, and economic recovery (after COVID-19). However, SML is also represented (often by minor parties) as precarious due to abuse and weak enforcement. Advancing Jerit's (2008) theory, it can be argued that the different reputations of the two major parties (National and Labour), political actors on opposite spectrums of a debate derive political benefits by emphasising different considerations. In the end, politicians have some sort of advantage to talk past one another in policy debates and political campaigns.

The chapter will first synthesise findings related to Research Question 1 (comparing how mainstream political parties represent the SML), followed by Research Question 2 (identifying how exploitation is represented and any solutions). The answers to these research questions will explain why politicians remain reactive (acting only when pressure emerges from the media) and use incremental policy measures despite a body of evidence demonstrating the extent of SML exploitation.

### **5.1. Representation of SML as an Issue in the Political Domain**

The first Research Question addressed by this thesis asks: How do different political parties in New Zealand represent the issue of seasonal migrant labour in policies, parliamentary debates, and press releases?

Political narratives are powerful tools to shape policies related to SML. For example, Former Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi stated that immigration is not the problem; it is the reaction, vision, strategy, and narrative to address it (Weymouth, 2016). In the context of policy development, narratives seek to define the problem, its cause, and solutions to resolve the problem. They also identify roles (victims, villains, heroes) and define success (Shanahan et al., 2018). This thesis identifies four overlapping narrative that parties use to represent SML as an

issue (Stringer et al., 2022), which will be used to answer RQ #1. The narratives of political parties establish agendas, predefine success, and legitimise solutions.

### **5.1.1. National Party – Economic Managerialism**

National represents SML as a key production factor that supports economic growth – higher exports and productivity. National’s stance is therefore to improve accessibility and predictability of SML to firms, and to increase and streamline SML when there is a shortage of labour that threatens output. This includes enabling a higher volume of SML and easing administrative requirements that negatively affect employers. Further, National argues that the RSE scheme boosts the living standards of Pacific families, allows them to learn new skills which enhance their social capital, and develops strong relationships between New Zealand and Pacific countries. National represents exploitation as a compliance issue that occurs due to a few corrupt employers or labour shortfalls. Consequently, National’s strategies to control exploitation involve strengthening enforcement and rules instead of reducing visa dependency. Thus, National focuses on productivity and industry demands while putting structural issues in the background, which leads to incremental solutions rather than a focus on addressing power imbalances.

National’s growth perspective links to Spoonley’s (2006) work on the political economy of New Zealand, in which politicians focused on fulfilling employer demand, whereas silences remain around labour-market outcomes and power disparities among migrants. National emphasis on enforcement instead of visa reforms contrasts with the literature, which argues that migrant labour abuse mainly occurs due to bounded visas (Collins F. L., 2024; Stringer & Michailova, 2019; Searle et al., 2015b). Additionally, National’s focus on regional prosperity aligns with productivity-orientation in official reviews (MBIE, 2010; NZPC, 2024).

### **5.1.2. Labour Party – A “Balanced” Middle Approach**

Labour represents SML as legitimate and beneficial for fulfilling timely production targets, provided that migrants have reasonable safeguards. As per the findings, Labour pairs employer accessibility with system design and compliance rules (including accreditation, pastoral-care obligations, and encouraging employers to train local workers) to enhance minimum labour standards and avoid mistreatment. Labour frames exploitation as a preventable risk that can be managed through rules and enforcement, whereas visa volume can increase if adequate measures

are in place. Labour accepts that SML should be compensated at fair wages to benefit Pacific families, while skill transfer is less of a priority. However, Labour's position keeps employer-bounded visas and structural dependence in place, even though these are often seen as the key drivers of exploitation. Power distribution is less important than compliance architecture in Labour's narratives, which highlights a productivity logic instead of protecting SML rights.

MBIE's (2010) assessments of RSE scheme frame these measures as "best practice" for seasonal programmes, arguing that audits and pastoral responsibilities manage risk. Labour's balanced approach welcomes large volume of SML but limiting key rights (such as mobility) and applying administrative measures to manage harms (Ruhs & Martin, 2017). New Zealand's reviews and scholarly work identified bounded visas are a key driver of abuse, so Labour's approach to improve rules is inconsistent with the literature because rules can mitigate abuse to some extent but do not eliminate structural loopholes (Stringer & Michailova, 2019; MBIE, 2019).

### **5.1.3. The Green Party – Humanitarian Approach**

The Green Party adopts a very different approach in contrast to other political parties. It primarily represents immigrants as people and then represents them as workers at the secondary level. The Greens suggest making visas portable, introducing an amnesty for SML workers that overstay, and integrating them into the broader community (GreenParty, 2025; March, 2022). The party is against the employer-tethered visa because it is the condition that the literature shows to enable exploitation and modern-day slavery (March, 2022). The Green Party attributes exploitation to employer-bounded visas instead of higher SML volume. Thus, the Greens' narrative aligns with the international discourse of "decoupling visas" (Costello, 2015).

The Greens' representation of immigrants [SML] follows the right-based approach, which focuses on protecting human dignity and capabilities instead of fulfilling industry demands (Freedland & Costello, 2014). Their support for decoupling visas – that is, to end employer-bound visas – aligns with the large body of New Zealand-based scholarly work and official review (Collins & Stringer, 2019; MBIE, 2023; Stringer & Michailova, 2019).

#### **5.1.4. The ACT Party – Liberal-Market Price-Signals**

ACT's central frame is to eliminate bureaucratic visa categories, allowing employers to pay a particular fee instead of bureaucratic mechanisms such as quotas or comprehensive eligibility tests (RNZ, 2022). This frame considers exploitation as a transaction-cost problem: they advocate for easier rules will allow firms to recruit necessary overseas labour, and fines to deter bad employer behaviour such as exploitation. Thus, ACT considers SML as a private good controlled through market prices, neglecting workers' rights, wellbeing, or welfare unless they produce economic externalities.

Presenting exploitation as a transaction-cost problem aligns with new-institutional logics (lower search/processing costs; funding surveillance via levies), leaving the power disparity intact. This contrasts with the literature, which argues that without granting mobility rights or decoupling visas, price instruments will not reduce dependency that facilitates abuse (Anderson B. , 2010; Ruhs & Martin, 2017; Stringer et al., 2022). The labour-rights literature identifies that the price-based model often transfers fees on workers (debt-bondage) and shifts accountability to workers (Stringer et al., 2022; Anderson B. , 2010).

#### **5.1.5. New Zealand First – Putting SML Second**

New Zealand First represents SML as a threat to local jobs and social capacity. It urges employers to hire New Zealanders, and argues that excessive SML intake exhausts accommodation, wages, and social services. New Zealand First holds that exploitation occurs because SML workers are low-cost labour that attract corrupt employers. Consequently, expansion of SML is not the remedy but rather strict rules, caps, employer responsibilities (wages and accommodation standards), and penalties (bans, or prosecutions) that would encourage employers to hire local workers. In this view, SML should be imported in limited numbers with tighter supervision. Compared to National, New Zealand First disregards the growth narrative. While the literature recommends reducing the power imbalance between SML and employers by eliminating employer-tied visas (Stringer, 2016; MBIE, 2023; CAB, 2017), New Zealand First's approach seeks to regulate and limit SML access in the first place. Its support for caps, labour-market tests and sanctions on employers shows that it wants to restrict SML while directing employers to rely on local labour.

### 5.1.6. Cross-Party Patterns and Points of Difference

Table 5.1 below summarises the concerned parties' core frames and key differences. Major parties – National and Labour – agreed that SML matters for New Zealand’s economy and accepted that the severe labour shortfall cannot be solved locally. Each party has a different core frame to represent SML differentiating their policy response. This problem frame sets the tone, National argue for growth, productivity, and industry competitiveness, Labour wants to continue but regulate SML. Meanwhile, ACT emphasises market prices, the Greens focus on worker rights, and New Zealand First on the interests of local workers. The parties believe that their solutions control exploitation.

Successive New Zealand governments have not been able to develop a coherent and meaningful response to the exploitation of SML, even though the problem has been well documented. A key barrier to achieving a coherent policy that addresses exploitation is that the major parties – National and Labour – primarily focus on the SML’s contribution in the labour-market, which generates significant economic growth and industrial profitability. Labour appears to play on both sides of the wicket. On one hand, it says SML is necessary but should be regulated to avoid abuse. On the other, it does not adopt a critical or structural perspective to meaningfully address the issue of exploitation. The task of articulating a more critical perspective is left for the minor parties, such as the Greens (who have less power than National and Labour).

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Core framing of SML</b>	<b>How they define SML problem?</b>	<b>Preferred solutions</b>	<b>Exploitation framing</b>	<b>SML role</b>
<b>National</b>	Economic growth & industrial competitiveness	Unavailability of SML cause produce spoilage, lower exports, and labour shortage.	Improve labour access, reduce administrative obstacles, targeted enforcement	Compliance problem limited: only a few employers causing problems.	Enhance productivity, exports, and regional development.
<b>Labour</b>	Balanced between growth and wellbeing	Seasonal SML is necessary but risky without protection.	Continue access but implement safeguards, such as accreditation, pastoral-care, audits, employer	Exploitation can be managed through rules and compliance.	Crucial but must be supported with safeguards.

			responsibilities, and strict enforcement.		
<b>Greens</b>	Rights-based	Employer- bounded visa and limited voice.	Give rights to workers, amnesty, union access and necessary legal and social support	Power imbalance and structural problems.	SML can work in New Zealand if their wellbeing is protected.
<b>ACT</b>	Marketised	Visa categories and transaction costs affect SML hiring.	Introduce fees, limit categories, simplify rules, and use services to fund services.	Compliance problem	Can be managed with market prices while abuse is a secondary problem.
<b>New Zealand First</b>	Restrictionist	Pressurised local jobs, wages, and housing.	Caps, labour- market tests, increase employer duties, and penalties.	Reduce visa numbers.	Used SML as last resort and prefer New Zealanders.

*Table 5.1 – How parties represent the SML issue*

## 5.2. Key Themes in New Zealand Political Discourse

The second Research Question addressed by this thesis asks: What are the main themes in New Zealand political discourse that limit how migrant labour exploitation is understood and addressed?

Having discussed above how political parties of New Zealand frame SML, this section addresses the second research question by discussing cross-party narratives that explain how exploitation is understood and addressed. The literature identified several factors, including visa conditions that make the workers dependent on their employers, lack of awareness of rights among overseas workers, economic pressures, fear of deportation, and the limited enforcement of labour laws (Stringer & Michailova, 2019). The political domain reframed these drivers in various ways, suggesting that problems are mainly administrative issues, or caused by only a handful of rogue

employers. This shifts attention from visa architecture and power disparities to incremental compliance solutions. The key themes that resonate in the New Zealand political domain related to SML and how it makes policy reactive are discussed below:

### **5.2.1. Economic Necessity**

Both National and Labour consider economic progress and competitiveness of industries extremely important, and they both present SML as an important factor in achieving this. National relies on this argument to justify higher SML intakes. Labour articulates economic growth-based arguments for SML but balances those with a concern for exploitation and for potential impacts on local workers. ACT argues for easier access to external labour, noting that harvests rot due to delays in recruiting labour. The Greens and union groups emphasise migrant rights but they have limited political power to enforce this argument. This economic prosperity narrative shifts debate to the volume of precarious SML required to achieve economic targets instead of how power balances function within the employment relationships. These narratives make SML instrumental and resonate with the “productivity vs. protection” tension stated in Bedford and Spoonley (2018) and Stringer et al. (2022) that promoting economic benefits of SML diverts the exploitation issue and the root cause of exploitation which is bounded visas.

### **5.2.2. Industry Demands**

Again, National and Labour (and to some extent ACT) represent SML as a just-in-time factor of production necessary for the efficiency and profitability of key industries. The industry needs narrative frames output as being at risk (produce can be spoiled, contracts can be lost), and success is evaluated through accessibility and predictability for growers (fast visa processing and larger or earlier allocations). Exploitation is often described as an administrative issue (slow visa processing, limited inspections of employers and some rogue entities) instead of a structural issue that is caused by power imbalances, employer-tied visas and limited worker mobility (MBIE, 2023; Stringer & Michailova, 2019). Major political parties only focused on the productivity and output gains of RSE and AEWV schemes, rendering harms unseen unless they are reported by the media or researched by academics. The employer needs are at the forefront of these political parties’ agendas, while worker rights that reduce power disparities – particularly freedom to switch employers – are limited. Harms to workers are mitigated through compliance measures. The situation that fruit harvest will spoil further legitimises shortcuts and harms such

as faster recruitment, relaxed due diligence, and crowded accommodation. This normalises an access-first approach in a political economy, as argued by Spoonley (2006). Thus, solutions focused on resolving compliance issues instead of improving the working and living conditions of migrants.

### **5.2.3. Benefits for All**

The third Theme found in the political domain is that SML not only benefits New Zealand's economy and industries but also lifts the standard of living of Oceania and Pacific families and countries. Relying on household income gains, remittances and skill transfer, politicians – mainly National and Labour – use these measures to evaluate success of their policies. Evaluation of the RSE scheme demonstrates triple win situation for workers, Pacific countries and New Zealand (Gibson & McKenzie, 2014) while migration in general (beside RSE scheme) leads to significant increases in the long-run earnings and assets in households of migrants (Gibson et al., 2018). Emphasis on these combined benefits in the political domain marginalises exploitation as an unfortunate outcome that can be managed instead of eliminated. Consequently, politicians suggest solutions such as pastoral care instead of granting rights to SML. Further, this benefits-to-all frame also conceals power disparities. For example, employer-tied visas and recruitment debt prevent workers from speaking up, whereas Pacific communities' expectation of future placements and remittances prevent abuse reporting (MBIE, 2019; Stringer & Michailova, 2019). The benefits-for-all theme legitimises the earlier two Themes (economic necessity and industry demands) shifting attention away from structural issues relating to visa architecture loopholes and strict audits, and resulting in a reactive government response – a pattern well-documented in the literature (Collins & Stringer, 2022; Lubeck & Adrian, 2022). It is important to note that this Theme mainly dominated by National while Labour argues for fair wage. Other minor political parties do not say anything about benefits noted in this theme.

### **5.2.4. Locals First**

The locals-first Theme focuses on protecting New Zealanders' employment, wages, housing, and social services. The findings of this theme convey two contrasting points: (1) locals should be prioritised for recruitment and (2) any residual or time-critical shortages can be fulfilled with SML. However, the locals-first Theme disregards the fact that New Zealanders are not attracted to horticulture and viticulture industries because the work is laborious, seasonal, low-paid, and requires workers to relocate to rural or remote areas (Bedford C. , 2020; Nagar, 2020;

RuralLeaders, 2022). The findings of this Theme contest the literature – National urged industries to prioritise local workers, but literature suggests that local workers are not interested due to low paid and demanding work – masking the factors that contribute to exploitation or discourage local workers from joining these industries.

### **5.2.5. SML Exploitation – Commodification**

All parties acknowledge that SML workers are exploited. However, the major parties marginalise exploitation as an issue, focussing instead on the positive consequences of SML. The Greens are unique because they openly acknowledge SML exploitation and propose solutions such as union involvement, end employer-bounded visa and introduce amnesty scheme. While union involvement is one of the ways to mitigate worker abuse, the National Party does not accept that unions should be involved in the accreditation process (NZP, 2023). Likewise, National and Labour agree that exploitation is an exceptional non-compliance problem that caused by some bad employers or poor inspections. These narratives undermine collective voices of the Greens and non-political actors including unions, workers, or government officials. Moreover, the focus on raising local labour while sidelining the welfare of precarious Pacific labour segment the labour market – local labour will be treated and paid well while seasonal migrants are neglected – which literature identifies as “dual labour” and will lead to the commodification of the SML (Costello, 2015).

### **5.2.6. How do these narratives constrain immigration policy?**

The narratives of each party mentioned in Table 5.2 rule in specific solutions but rule out others. Ultimate decisions, however, are driven by political power. For example, while MBIE stated that employer-assisted visa exploits employees and the Green Party urges for portable visa, government ministers proposed to opt for short-term migrant visas in which the exploitation still remains (MBIE, 2021; Collins & Stringer, 2019). Greens MPs continuously advocate for SML and urge to uncouple visas from single employer but National and Labour do not welcome this suggestion because it would create additional burden on employers (March, 2023a; March, 2023b). Existing policy responses thus lead to surface level solutions – infringement notices and (a small number of) prosecutions. Structural solutions have remained elusive because dominant narratives focused on economic growth and industry needs.

This explains why migrant workers are still exploited in a developed country like New Zealand. Spoonley’s (2006) work highlights that New Zealand’s political economy makes growth attractive whereas rights appear less important. Migrants are casted as economic units while their rights are less recognised – because strict rights implementation is perceived as anti-business. As such, technocratic solutions are considered appropriate. As long as discourse only focuses on a business-as-usual approach, policy will be reactive and address symptoms rather than root causes that academics and official inquiries have long highlighted.

<b>Theme</b>	<b>What the theme asserts?</b>	<b>Competing narratives</b>
Economic necessity	SML is necessary for economy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>National:</b> Expand/streamline SML</li> <li>• <b>Labour:</b> Expand SML but with guardrails</li> </ul>
Industry needs	Just-in-time labour to meet time critical peaks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>National:</b> Meet industry needs</li> <li>• <b>Labour:</b> Meet industry needs but consider SML condition</li> <li>• <b>ACT:</b> Prefer SML in peak season</li> <li>• <b>Greens:</b> Anxious about SML precarity</li> </ul>
Benefits-for-all	SML benefits Pacific workers, and their families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>National:</b> Focused on gains of SML</li> <li>• <b>Labour:</b> Fair wage for SML</li> </ul>
Locals-First	Prioritise New Zealand workers first	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>National/Labour:</b> New Zealand workers should be hired first but industry labour demand is difficult to fulfil with local labour.</li> <li>• <b>New Zealand First:</b> Fulfil industry demand with local workers and use SML as a last resort.</li> </ul>
SML Exploitation	SML harm is acknowledged but framing varies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>National/Labour:</b> Acknowledge SML harm but marginalise.</li> <li>• <b>Greens:</b> Acknowledge and advocate for rights of SML.</li> </ul>

*Table 5.2 – Different political parties’ narratives for each theme*

Economic benefits and industry needs dominate the political discourse. Contrastingly, the Green party and non-parliamentary political entities (immigration lawyers, unions, equal employment commissioners) are concerned with the abusive practice prevailing in key industries. The collective narratives of dominant parties represent exploitation as a compliance glitch and limit the policy tools that can eliminate or at least control exploitation. Understanding these constraints is important to identify structural issues (tied-visa, supply chain power, and migrant precarity) and that incremental improvements do not contribute to eliminating or at least controlling exploitation.

### **5.3. Legitimising SML Exploitation**

The findings of this thesis presented evidence that political parties legitimise the exploitation of migrants by highlighting the (largely economic) benefits of SML. Media and political attention to this issue, however, does require political parties to develop narratives that help them get public support. For example, National and Labour consistently support the RSE and AEWV by stating that these schemes produce significant economic and productivity benefits, because they increase exports, horticulture production, and lift GDP. These positive aspects legitimise RSE and AEWV schemes even while partially acknowledging the exploitative conditions in which SML work and live. However, whether this emphasis on the positive aspects of SML influenced public perceptions is difficult to identify.

Some academics consider legitimising behaviour as damaging, mainly if it backs activities that are against the interests of specific groups within the society. For instance, Puxty (1991, p. 39) argues that: “I do not agree on the point that legitimisation is innocuous... I consider legitimisation as quite harmful because it is a constraint to educate people and let them progress”. Puxty’s statement highlights that harm exists. For example, MPs of the National and Labour focused on the economic gains achieved through SML and their narratives mask drivers of exploitation. Thus, legitimisation practices are damaging because they encourage people to focus only on one aspect of an issue while diverting their attention from other important aspects of the issue.

### **5.4. Why are SML unable to resist exploitation?**

The seasonal migrant worker community is limited in its capacity to resist exploitation due partly to the lack of collectivism in the contemporary neo-liberal state. Historically, the NZ Workers

Union backed workers in the primary industries (Williamson & Harris, 2024; Williamson et al., 2017). After its collapse in the 1980s, the Agricultural Workers Union of New Zealand (AWUNZ) took charge, but literature suggests that it struggled to develop collectivism due to the Employment Contracts Act of 1990 (Williamson & Harris, 2024). ECA fractured collectivism in the primary sectors of New Zealand, making wage theft and other exploitative acts more likely. Bi (2016) suggests that SML are less educated, and they are unable to bring any legal claims. Social media is a potential channel to mobilise collectivism. However, lower education, no digital literacy, and limited connectivity of workers with each other prevent workers from taking any collective action against employer misconduct.

### **5.5. Enforcement and Funding Constraints**

The earlier literature review (Chapter 2) highlighted significant enforcement and funding gaps which contribute to SML exploitation. While political representation of these issues is limited, these constraints have significant policy implications. At a macro level, New Zealand's position declined in the U.S trafficking in Persons Report to Tier 2 due to inadequate prosecutions and actions, damaging the country's international reputation (United States Department of State, 2024). This contributes to SML vulnerabilities, with investigations declining by approximately 70% since 2017 (Xia, 2022).

At a micro level, RSE requires workers to work in remote locations, leading to isolation and an increased likelihood of exploitation due to limited audit coverage, while AEWV increases debt bondage (Human Rights Commission, 2024). Union involvement in pastoral care does provide some hope for vulnerable workers, but economic priorities undermine worker welfare and create implementation gaps. For example, stand-down lists in 2023 have recovered \$3 million in arrears since 2022 but limited funding affected the scope. To overcome this, increasing the budget to \$100 million, recruiting more inspectors, and investment in digital tools can mitigate exploitation.

## **Chapter 6 – Conclusion**

This thesis has identified that while SML exploitation has been extensively reported in the literature, successive governments have so far not addressed it in a meaningful way. Ministers are the key actors who hold the statutory power of policy-making that can either benefit or harm other stakeholders (SML, local labour, unions). The prevailing discourse revealed that politicians emphasise the economic benefits of SML and use that as a justification for supporting its continuation. A political environment that limits unionism, supports business-friendly policies, and lowers compliance costs allows employers to exploit their higher market power. This may result in practices such as unnecessary wage deductions, poor working conditions, and a lack of employee protection, among other issues. Indeed, de-collectivism is the fundamental and most devastating moment in the New Zealand industrial relations context, which grants undue market power to employers to exploit SML.

While the Green Party offers a critical discourse in the political domain, it has historically lacked the statutory power to develop interventions that offer SML with legal safeguards. The Greens' advocacy efforts are short of sufficient public support. If public perceptions call to safeguard the rights of SML, even a neo-liberal and anti-collectivist government will control exploitation and abuse despite the industries' preference for the opposite. However, the findings reveal that neither major political party (National and Labour) has argued for a meaningful return to collectivism, which means restoration of unions or disciplining employers is not possible, at least in the short-term. Within the wider domain of New Zealand society and the Pacific region, employer and government choices – lacking regulation – may well damage the reputation of New Zealand as a destination of employee choice and the social licence to operate of businesses. Thus, the government should think of the wellbeing and welfare of the very SML who, although performing low-to-moderately skilled tasks, play a significant role in New Zealand's economy.

## 6.1. Strengths and Limitations

A key strength of this study is its emphasis on political discourse and narrative. Previous studies have focused on the details and the drivers of SML exploitation. Unlike earlier studies, this study reviews political narratives. Many studies conducted on the issue of SML have mostly performed interviews with migrants, focusing on the drivers and why the exploitation occurs. However, previous studies do not answer why the government is not taking any action on this issue. This is the first study that explains why successive governments have so far been unwilling to address this exploitation. A second strength of this study is the comprehensive inclusion of different sorts of data (i.e., publicly available statements of major political actors) to explore how relevant issues have been explored within political discourse.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this thesis so that any future use of its ideas or arguments will be done cautiously. This study used publicly available discourse. When politicians issue a press release or even write a social media post, they become very careful in expressing their ideas. This means they omit important thoughts, arguments, or details – in favour or against SML – that they are unwilling to discuss publicly. Interviews can help uncover a wider range of thoughts and other hidden motives. Secondly, this study adopted thematic analysis. It could also adopt narrative analysis, which can add in-depth insights on the themes, strengthening the analysis. According to Shanahan et al. (2018), narrative analysis would define the specific policy context in which policy narratives are developed, identify characters (villains, heroes, victims, beneficiaries, allies, or opponents), define plots, and the moral of the story (solution). If narrative analysis were used, it would stitch themes into stories – linking problem, cause, solution – instead of what narratives occur and explain why exploitation is taken as a compliance failure and policy steers to audits instead of balancing power. Future studies can adopt narrative analysis of political narratives to add depth.

Despite these limitations, the thesis identifies that the politicians fall short of solutions because they emphasise economic benefits. Instead of backing any single narrative, this thesis shows how competing representations of the SML frame the policies. Unless those frames move from compliance to root causes, addressing exploitation will be reactive and piecemeal.

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