

Thousands join New Zealand anti-poverty march

A correspondent
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A nationwide, month-long march against poverty in New Zealand culminated on October 1 in a rally of some 6,000 people outside the parliament building in the capital of Wellington. The demonstration was the largest protest by workers, welfare beneficiaries and unemployed since the passing of the Employment Contracts Act by the National Party government in 1990.

Called the 'Hikoi of Hope' (after a Maori term meaning a 'walk'), the march was organised by the Anglican church, with the backing of Catholics, Quakers, Presbyterians, Jews, the Salvation Army and Grey Power. It began in early September with two groups setting out simultaneously from the northern and southernmost ends of the country.

As the two legs of the march worked their way towards Wellington they were assisted by local groups and held rallies in major centres--5,000 participated in Auckland, New Zealand's largest city, and over 1,000 in Christchurch. According to organisers. Over 30,000 people nationwide either participated in or directly supported the march.

The decision of the Anglican synod to call the march reflects at least partially the crisis facing the churches and other volunteer social service agencies which have been placed under enormous strains by the extent of poverty and severe cutbacks to government welfare funding. One spokesman said the churches currently sustain almost a million volunteer hours per week to provide emergency assistance to victims of government economic and social policies.

New Zealand is now officially in recession after recording two successive quarters of negative growth. The jobless rate is just under 8 percent and is expected to rise to 8.5 percent this year. Many of the welfare programs--public housing, welfare benefits, free public health care--put in place since the 1930s either have been abolished or severely cut, forcing thousands of working

class families to rely on volunteer organisations for basic essentials. Many depend on church-run 'food banks' to provide enough food for themselves and their children.

The march was an expression of the discontent and opposition to the growing social crisis facing broad layers of people. Anglican bishop and former governor-general Paul Reeves said: 'We're conscious that people are hurting, some of them beyond the point of tolerance. We want to raise the issues of the values involved when our elected representatives make decisions about allocating resources.'

Those present outside parliament included workers, students, unemployed and the elderly, as well as many middle class people. Prominent were Maori and Pacific Islanders who represent the most oppressed sections of the working class. There were also workers from work sites, including a group holding signs counting down the number of recent job losses in the manufacturing sector, and contingents of superannuants who had learned, just the day before, of new government attacks on the aged pension.

From the outset of the march, however, the church leaders went to considerable lengths to prevent any political discussion about the implications of growing poverty and unemployment. Instead they called on 'god' to assist politicians to make wise decisions on behalf of the poor, and led chants of 'enough is enough'. Organisers imposed a ban on political banners and slogans, which was accepted by the trade unions and political organisations supporting the march.

The Wellington rally was dominated by an hour-long religious service and speeches from various parliamentary representatives. Social Welfare Minister Roger Sowry attempted to address the crowd but was greeted with such overwhelming hostility that he was forced to give up. Booing and jeering also met the MPs representing the right-wing ACT party, NZ First and the so-called

independents who are currently supporting the minority National Party government.

Labour leader Helen Clark was able to address the rally on behalf of the opposition. But beyond noting that parliament must 'do something' about the widening gap between rich and poor, she made no concrete proposals to alleviate the crisis facing workers or to reverse any of the policies of the Nationals.

A decade ago a March Against Unemployment condemned the record levels of joblessness created by the then Labour government's policies of privatisation and restructuring. The march was organised by a network of unemployed centres, many of which had connections to various middle class radical organisations such as the Workers Socialist League, and had the backing of the trade unions.

Then, as now, the vague protest perspective simply dissipated the widespread anger and hostility among workers, young people and the unemployed against the impact of government policies. But it is measure of the political bankruptcy of the Labour Party, Alliance, the trade unions and the various radicals that under conditions where the Nationals have devastated the lives of working people, the opposition falls under the sway of the churches.

It is instructive that the former Labour prime minister, David Lange, whose government launched the program of 'market reforms' from 1984 onwards, appeared on national television to attack the march as futile. For six years between 1984 and 1990 the Labour government, supported by the trade unions, imposed a program of cutbacks to jobs, working conditions and social services that was then continued and deepened by the National Party. Labour and Alliance are preparing for office after the next elections and will impose a program in line with the demands of big business for further cuts to government spending.

The last thing these opposition parties want is to come to power under conditions of a growing protest movement of the working class over jobs, welfare, health and education.



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