

New Zealand teacher faces victimisation following antiwar demonstration

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Paul Hopkinson, a 37-year-old Wellington secondary school teacher, was one of five antiwar protestors arrested outside the New Zealand parliament on Monday March 10, following a demonstration by more than 600 people against Australian Prime Minister John Howard. Howard's three-day official visit came just two weeks after tens of thousands had turned out in the largest political mobilisation in New Zealand in more than twenty years.

The circumstances of the Wellington arrests and Hopkinson's subsequent treatment indicate high level decisions are being taken to target and victimise layers of the growing protest movement. With the US-led war against Iraq creating unprecedented levels of opposition, concerted efforts are being made in ruling circles to isolate and silence selected radical activists.

In the past weeks, considerable anger has been directed against the Labour government. The anti-Howard protests also focused on Prime Minister Helen Clark's effusive welcome for the Australian prime minister and his pro-US policy. Clark emphasised her agreement with the "aims" of Australia and the US, declaring that her differences were simply over the "means" of disarming Iraq. New Zealand, which has a frigate and an airforce reconnaissance aircraft operating in the Gulf region, would have provided material assistance to a war effort, she said, if it had won the backing of the UN.

Several hoax "terrorist" threats were intercepted in the mail during the week prior to the visit and security was massively stepped up. Two hundred police were mobilised in the capital Wellington, while armed marksmen were observed on duty on rooftops around parliament and the National War Memorial.

The demonstration was timed to coincide with a state luncheon for Howard in parliament's banquet hall. Mid-

way through the rally Hopkinson, a member of the "Anti-Capitalist Alliance", set fire to an Australian and a New Zealand flag. He made a brief speech denouncing Australian and New Zealand imperialism, declaring that both countries were guilty of supporting sanctions responsible for the deaths of one and a half million Iraqis.

Police made no arrests during the rally itself. However, as the demonstration was breaking up, an incident involving a bag of dirt being thrown at Howard's departing car provided them with the opportunity to move against suspected "ringleaders". Witnesses said that officers deliberately created a provocation by pushing and jostling protestors, many of them from behind. They then moved in and grabbed certain targeted individuals. Police assaulted at least one who was lying on the ground, while they flattened the Philippines Ambassador who got caught up in the melee, receiving cuts and bruises.

Hopkinson and the four others who were arrested were taken to the Wellington Central Police Station and charged with a variety of minor offences, including obstruction and causing a disturbance. In the course of the next three days, Hopkinson became the subject of a hostile campaign led by a talkback radio station, Radio Pacific, which specifically targeted his role as a teacher. Egged on by the station's morning talkback host, several listeners made telephone complaints to his school. Despite the campaign of intimidation, however, he continued to use media interviews throughout the week to highlight his antiwar views and his right to demonstrate.

On the evening of March 13, the day before the five were due to appear in court, a police spokesman appeared on television news to announce that more severe charges would be laid. Hopkinson told the

World Socialist Web Site that he only heard about the fresh charges from a journalist. The first is a previously unused provision under the Flags, Emblems and Names Protection Act to prevent anyone from “displaying, destroying or damaging” the New Zealand flag with the intention of “dishonouring” it. The law was originally enacted in 1981 by the conservative Muldoon government, during the height of the mass demonstrations against the South African Springboks Rugby tour. It carries a maximum \$500 fine. Hopkinson also faces a separate charge of “criminal nuisance,” which carries a maximum 12 months’ prison sentence, and an additional charge of “obstruction”.

The charge of criminal nuisance is likely to be particularly serious in the long-term. As a provisionally registered teacher, Hopkinson’s teaching license could be revoked if he is convicted of any offence carrying a penalty of 12 months’ imprisonment or more. This provision is the outcome of initiatives by the Labour government to intensify state discipline over teachers. With the co-operation of the teacher unions, the Clark government moved to strengthen the powers of the former Teacher Registration Board—now revamped as the “Teachers’ Council”—to facilitate the sacking of teachers found guilty of offences committed outside the workplace.

During the court proceedings, the prosecutor applied for stringent bail restrictions, including preventing Hopkinson from associating with another arrested protestor and barring him from entering the grounds of parliament or engaging in protests. Hopkinson’s lawyer argued that these conditions were a blatant attempt by the police to prevent his client from exercising his democratic right to protest. The judge rejected the police submission and granted bail on condition that Hopkinson did not participate in any unlawful protest activity.

The charge of “dishonouring the flag” has never before been laid. In 1995, a Maori land rights protestor was found guilty of “offensive behaviour” and fined \$500 after trampling and wiping his feet on the flag, but he was not charged under the Flags, Emblems and Names Protection Act.

During the early 1990s, under the National government, demonstrators angered by government cuts to social welfare took to burning effigies of

Finance Minister Ruth Richardson and Social Welfare Minister Jenny Shipley. None faced charges similar to those involved in the present case. Moreover, Hopkinson was not the only person to burn a flag at the Wellington demonstration. At least one other—a pensioner—did as well. But, despite being named and interviewed in the *Dominion Post* newspaper, he has not been arrested.

For the Flags, Emblems and Names Protection Act to be used, the consent of the Attorney General—Margaret Wilson—is necessary. This signifies that the police actions against Paul Hopkinson bear all the hallmarks of a planned operation, approved at the highest political level. Indeed, it is highly likely that the “Anti-Capitalist Alliance” and similar groups have been under close surveillance for an extended period of time.

The charging and victimisation of Paul Hopkinson constitutes a fundamental and dangerous attack on basic democratic rights, carried out under the auspices of a Labour government. It will be used in the coming period as a precedent for repressive operations against ordinary working people and youth who are engaged in struggles against the criminal US-led war against Iraq, as well as the government’s escalating attacks on jobs and living standards at home.



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