

Call for “national unity” following New Zealand earthquake

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New Zealand Prime Minister John Key yesterday asked the country to observe a two-minute silence to honour victims of the earthquake that devastated Christchurch on February 22. One week after the quake, the mounting toll stands at 154 dead. More than 50 people are still officially missing, while some 2,000 have been injured, with at least 160 requiring critical care.

Key said the two-minute silence was “a sign of unity for the people of Canterbury who are enduring a tragedy beyond what most of us can imagine”. For the government, the “unity” call is designed to divert attention away from where culpability actually lies for the extent of loss of life, injury and devastation that has occurred in the country’s second largest city.

This position is shared by the entire ruling elite. During a fleeting visit over the weekend, former Labour Prime Minister Helen Clark, now head of the United Nations Development Program, warned it was time to “put politics aside,” while the New Zealand media has calibrated its coverage to avoid probing any critical issues. The editor of the Christchurch daily, the *Press*, said on morning television that now was not the time to begin apportioning “blame”.

It is clear, however, from the official response to the two previous quakes, which hit Christchurch on September 4 and December 26, that there were no effective preparations for this disaster. Tens of thousands of ordinary working people and their communities may never recover, financially or emotionally. Government priorities in any so-called recovery plan will inevitably be at odds with the needs of working people.

Some quake victims in neglected working class suburbs are beginning to voice criticism of the official relief effort. TV 1 News on Sunday night gave a glimpse of their plight in an interview with a group of 20 Aranui residents, who were living in a domestic garage with no sanitation. Five days after the earthquake, with their homes among the 55,000 properties without reticulating water, they were anxiously awaiting the arrival of portable toilets, which were, they were told, being shipped from Australia. Members of the group said the suburb had seen “no sign” of any officials. It had simply fallen “off the grid”.

Mass retrenchments have begun. On Monday, the major

Foodstuffs supermarket chain announced the closure of its New World stores in Redcliffs and St Martins, with the loss of 236 jobs.

Key announced a paltry package of measures for the thousands now about to join the sacked workers. Temporarily or permanently unemployed full-time workers will be eligible for a “subsidy” of up to \$400 per week. The payment applies only for the next six weeks and is less than the minimum wage which, at \$13 an hour, is not enough to provide for the most basic necessities of life, even under “normal” conditions. Part-time workers will receive \$240 net per week. After six weeks, the recipients of these contemptible amounts will be forced onto the dole queues, under conditions where unemployment nationwide is already nearly 7 percent, and 20 percent among young people.

Christchurch-based employers will receive payments of \$500 gross per week for each full-time employee, which will be paid to those who are kept on. For part-time workers, the payment will be \$300 gross per week. The wage subsidy, again for six weeks, will only apply to a narrow range of local businesses. Any that are part of a national chain, or are overseas owned, and any that carry their own insurance, will not be eligible.

Key said he expected about 42,000 people would access the assistance packages, at a total cost of \$100 to \$120 million. By contrast, the government last year committed \$1.6 billion to bail out the privately-owned, Christchurch-based South Canterbury Finance Company, within two days of its announced liquidation.

The earthquake measures announced by Key pale compared with the scale of the crisis. No area of life remains unaffected. Yesterday, another 200 properties had to be evacuated in the hillside suburbs of Clifton Hill and Redcliffs, and altogether 10,000 residents are expected to need temporary accommodation. In street after street, the liquefaction mud is so thick that travelling in a vehicle is impossible. The Ministry of Education is pushing schools to re-open as soon as their buildings and property are cleared, without giving a thought to the many teachers and students who remain homeless. Tertiary students will be required to enroll elsewhere, despite the fact that government policies have forced all tertiary institutions to cap their intakes.

Homes have been abandoned as an estimated 10,000 people a day flee the city. Long queues have snaked through Christchurch's airport since the quake, with hundreds sleeping there every night.

Recovery efforts remain centred on the Canterbury Television (CTV) and Pyne Gould Corporation buildings, both of which stand in ruins, with unreclaimed bodies among the rubble. Questions have begun to emerge about how and why these two buildings collapsed, and what processes were put in place after the earlier earthquakes.

According to an investigation by Rowan Callick of the *Australian* newspaper, published on February 26, the CTV building was not designed to withstand an earthquake of the 6.3 magnitude of last week's aftershock. Nevertheless, according to Christchurch deputy mayor, Ngaire Button, the building had been inspected by engineers and "declared safe" following the previous quakes. Button's response was: "I guess questions will be asked about the building code."

The *Australian* reported that the Christchurch City Council's assessment after September 4 was that the city "lies in an intermediate seismicity zone," but with earthquake sources "large and close enough to cause significant damage". It listed 7,600 buildings as "earthquake prone," as defined by the most recent 2004 code.

The council has now revealed that its inspection process, carried out by private engineers, was done on a superficial "by sight" basis. Buildings were given a red, yellow or green sticker according to the apparent severity of the damage. Those with a green sticker were immediately placed back into the hands of their owners, who were able to make their own decisions as to whether to order a full engineering inspection. The Council required no documentation or reports. Both the CTV and Pyne Gould buildings were in the "green sticker" category.

While the CTV building appeared modern, it was almost 50 years old. It was constructed from reinforced concrete and steel, with each floor slab held up by concrete columns and beams. Under the impact of the quake, the slabs moved sideways and snapped off their supporting columns, which were then crushed. The building had not had a major anti-earthquake retrofit. Two people who had worked there following the September quake told the local media that they had been concerned about its stability. One told TV3's John Campbell that it had begun "creaking and groaning" periodically. According to the *New Zealand Herald*, CTV managing director Murray Wood had spoken of shifting the business out of the building just the day before he died in its collapse.

No-one from the New Zealand media has sought to investigate any of these witness statements. According to the *Australian* on Monday, demolition work on an adjoining site may also have weakened the CTV building the day before the earthquake struck. Contractors clearing the site had drilled

holes in its back wall, along the ground floor and also the second storey of the building.

Last week's tragedy was entirely foreseeable, but none of the authorities took measures to prepare for it. GNS Science's natural hazards manager, Kelvin Berryman, told the *Dominion Post* that such an aftershock was "not beyond expectations" following the September quake. Structural Engineers Society president John Hare said Christchurch had been "passive" in strengthening its buildings and the same could be said for Auckland, the largest city. "I would hate to have an earthquake in Auckland, because I don't think there has been very much done about it at all," he said.

Financial commentators are already advocating that the enormous costs of both recent quakes, which have ballooned to an estimated NZ\$20 billion, be imposed onto working people through increased costs and levies. Writing today, *New Zealand Herald* columnist Bernard Hickey noted that insurance and reinsurance payouts would not be enough to rebuild Christchurch.

New Zealand is already facing a net foreign debt of around 90.5 percent of gross domestic product by 2015—similar to debt levels in Portugal, Ireland, Greece and Spain. Most of it is held by four Australian-owned banks, and both they and the government face a ratings review for a possible downgrade from Standard and Poor's.

The conclusion, according to Hickey, is that borrowing more "simply delays and compounds a moment of reckoning for the New Zealand economy". He added: "At some point we have to face up to the point that our wealth has been significantly reduced, our earning power has been damaged and we need to reduce our standard of living." Questioned by TV3 news last night, Finance Minister Bill English refused to rule out major fiscal cuts, including to family tax rebates and student loans. At the same time, public servants involved in pay negotiations have been told there is no money left.

The government yesterday announced an inquiry into the collapse of the CTV and Pyne Gould buildings, a sign of the growing nervousness in ruling circles of the explosive social impact of the quake. Any such inquiry will be a whitewash, aimed at covering up the fact that the grossly inadequate emergency planning, building codes and relief measures reveal a total failure not only of government, but of the socio-economic order itself. While the technology, knowledge and resources exist, the social and economic priorities of the private profit system make it impossible for them to be marshalled and utilised in order to protect the mass of ordinary people from the impact of such major natural disasters.



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