

Police evict Occupy protesters in two New Zealand cities

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Occupy camps in two New Zealand cities were closed down last week when police and security guards removed tents and evicted the remaining protesters. The camps in Auckland and Wellington were set up in October during global protests against social inequality. The closures leave a group in Hagley Park, Christchurch, as the country's only remaining Occupy site.

On January 23 and 26, police and security guards raided Occupy Auckland in Aotea Square. Over two days, 21 people were arrested on charges of breaching the peace and resisting arrest, as protesters sought to prevent the confiscation of their camping gear. The January 26 raid was carried out after a handful of people re-entered the square following the first crackdown. Auckland City Council (ACC) fenced off sections of the square to prevent the camp from being re-established. Camps in Albert Park and Victoria Park were also closed.

About 60 police and scores of security staff were involved in the early morning operations. Some occupiers left voluntarily, but others refused and were dragged away. They included a pregnant woman and her nine-month-old baby. Protesters complained that police deliberately concealed their identification during the initial arrests.

On January 28, more than 100 people marched down Queen Street in protest, stopping traffic in downtown Auckland before heading to Aotea Square. They dispersed after being threatened with arrest for trespassing.

Before Christmas, a judge had ruled the Occupy

group was breaching a by-law governing the use of public places and had ordered the camp's removal. Most protesters moved their tents to other locations. Another judge subsequently rejected as "draconian" an ACC application to immediately arrest and imprison those who remained. She had warned, however, that the court would not tolerate "continued defiance," and imprisonment could result if the occupiers did not comply.

In order to circumvent possible legal challenges, the ACC then invoked a by-law preventing camping in unauthorised areas. Council CEO Doug McKay claimed the ACC was "not removing the people," but rather "the physical equipment and structures." The council had legal advice that it could confiscate the gear despite the second judge's ruling, anticipating that this would force the protesters to abandon the occupation. McKay said the council would still seek arrest warrants for people who continued to try to occupy the site.

The Wellington City Council, which had been watching the Auckland developments, quickly followed suit. On January 31, about 20 people who were still at the Occupy Wellington site in Civic Square were evicted. The protesters co-operated with police, but three people who subsequently returned were arrested.

The crackdown, like similar police operations internationally, is an attack on basic democratic rights. Early yesterday morning, police removed the Occupy Sydney campsite in Martin Place in the city's business district and arrested six people.

Despite concerted attempts to dismiss the significance

of the Occupy protests, they have highlighted the glaring social inequality between the capitalist elite and the majority of the population. Fearing the encampments could encourage a broader movement in the working class, authorities at every level have turned to the use of state force to shut them down.

In this, a layer of pseudo-left politicians, commentators and activists has played a perfidious role. In Auckland the “centre-left” council, led by Mayor Len Brown—a member of the Labour Party—voted 18-2 to send in the police against the Occupy protest.

The longer the protests had continued, the more strident have been the denunciations by council spokesmen and media commentators. Former Radio NZ “Morning Report” anchorman Sean Plunket wrote in the *Dominion Post* on January 28 that ACC chief McKay had “finally earned his \$600,000 plus salary” by suppressing the Auckland protest. Plunket demanded the same action against Occupy Wellington, declaring it was “long past” time for “any sort of pandering to those who have abused the ratepayer’s tolerance and patience for so long.”

The Wellington council, led by the Green Party-aligned mayor, Celia Wade-Brown, acted accordingly, exposing the cynical character of her visit to the camp in October, during which she claimed to sympathise with the Occupy cause. The council issued the protesters a notice to quit in early January, then a letter warning that the council’s patience was “wearing thin,” before mobilising the police to close it down. As in Auckland, a council by-law designed to stop camping in public places was used as the pretext.

The suppression of the Occupy movement underscores the necessity for a clear political perspective. The protests were dominated by the conception, promoted by various pseudo-left groupings, that “non-political” protest could pressure the ruling elite to grant concessions and reforms. However, a genuine fight for social justice requires a turn to the working class and its independent political mobilisation to abolish the profit system, which is the root cause of social inequality, and restructure society on a socialist

basis.



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