New Zealand: Thousands protest against Israel's assault on Gaza

Tom Peters
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Thousands of people protested in the New Zealand cities of Auckland and Wellington on Saturday, for the second week in a row, to express their outrage over Israel's murderous assault on Gaza. The protests attracted a broad cross-section of people, including many young workers and students, and people from Palestinian and Middle Eastern backgrounds.

In Auckland 1,000 people marched from Aotea Square to the US consulate, chanting "Israel, USA, how many people have you killed today?", while in Wellington 500 people marched to the Israeli embassy, chanting "End the siege of Gaza!" and "Netanyahu, you can't hide, we charge you with genocide!"

Over the past two weeks the bombardment and ground invasion have killed more than 1,100 Palestinians, the vast majority civilians, including hundreds of children.

Israeli bombs have destroyed houses, hospitals, schools, ambulances, journalists and vital infrastructure. More than 1.2 million people—two thirds of Gaza's population—are suffering from disruptions to the water supply and sewage system.

On July 22 the New Zealand parliament passed a motion expressing "grave concern" at the death toll in Gaza and calling for a ceasefire by "both parties". Prime Minister John Key declared that "both sides have breached international law by failing to protect civilians" and repeated the mantra that "Israel has the right to defend itself", which has been used to justify repeated attacks on the defenceless population of Gaza.

Speaking to TV3, Key praised US President Barack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry, who has called for a ceasefire that amounts to an unconditional surrender by Gaza's population. The US provides $3 billion in aid to Israel's military each year.

Opposition Labour Party leader David Cunliffe praised Key's statements and similarly criticised both Israel and Palestine. Speaking to Radio Live on July 20, Labour's foreign affairs spokesman David Shearer feigned sympathy for the Palestinians but described Israel's actions as "self defence... If you were sitting in a country and you had rockets being fired into your country you'd want to do something about it."

The claims that "both sides" are responsible for the bloodbath and that Israel is somehow acting in self-defence, are ludicrous. Israel is waging a massive military offensive aimed at breaking the back of Palestinian resistance and strengthening its grip over the occupied territories. The defensive actions by Hamas, including the firing of crude rockets into Israel, bear no comparison.

The defence of Israel by the NZ government and opposition stands in stark contrast to their attacks on Russia over the downing of flight MH17 in Ukraine. On the same day as the Gaza motion was passed, parliament unanimously adopted another motion that supported US imperialism in its campaign to use the disaster as a pretext for military intervention.

While the rallies on July 19 and 26 expressed the widespread abhorrence at Israel's invasion, the perspective advanced by the various speakers represents a political dead end. In Auckland, Greens MP Catherine Delahunty called for the government to impose sanctions on Israel. The Maori nationalist Mana Party, whose representatives addressed both rallies, called for the Israeli embassy to be closed. Speakers also called for a boycott of Israeli products and divestment from companies that operate in Israel.

These measures—even if they were adopted by capitalist governments which fully support US imperialism and the Zionist regime—would do nothing to end the oppression of Palestinians and would serve

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to divide the working class in the region. The pseudo-left groups Socialist Aotearoa, Fightback and the International Socialist Organisation (ISO), which are affiliated to Mana and helped organise the rallies, supported the demand for "boycott, divestment and sanctions" (BDS). In Wellington a speaker from the ISO said "We want to see pressure for BDS... to be taken up across the political parties".

Protesters in Auckland marched to the US Consulate. Unite union's Mike Treen said this was because US military aid “enabled Israel to launch acts of aggression against Palestinians”. All of New Zealand's pseudo-left groups have, however, lined up with US imperialism's drive to global war. They have backed the so-called “rebels” in Syria and endorsed the US-led conspiracy against Russia. With their support, Mana participated in a parliamentary vote in March condemning Russia over the Ukraine crisis.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to some of those attending the Wellington rally, and distributed the WSWS statement, "The Gaza war crimes and the bankruptcy of nationalism."

Tim, an artist, said: "I've seen this despicable disgrace against humanity going on for my whole life, and I'm disgusted by it, it's horrific. The world needs to finally do something about this complete social injustice. Israel should be up in front of the Hague for war crimes for what's going on. It's abhorrent."

He denounced the claim that Israel was acting in self-defence, adding that "they're bombing a school that is a UN sanctuary". Commenting on the NZ government's position, he said: "We're lapdogs for the United States. John Key plays golf with Obama, so I can't see them opposing anything, unless we do something about it from the streets."

Juma, a student of accounting, commented on the US support for Israel: "I have nothing against America but I do have something against the government and what they're doing. I think it's horrible that they're not even standing up for children. You can't blame everything on Hamas, it's ridiculous. It's heart breaking that hospitals have been destroyed. The photos of the children killed on the beach with their bodies torn apart—it just breaks you. I'm really disappointed in the United Nations, I would have thought they would come in. It's obvious what's happening is wrong, it's just tragic that no one's really doing anything about it."

Regarding Washington's intervention in Iraq, she said: "The Middle East has been the main target only because of the oil. America whispers between countries and makes war between Shia and Sunni. If you look at it, it goes back to America. They know that if a group of people are united, they're strong, so in order to break that strength you need to create divisions."

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