New Zealand vigils demand increased refugee intake

Tom Peters
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Thousands of people attended vigils throughout New Zealand on Thursday calling on the government to lift its annual United Nations refugee quota. More than 1,000 people gathered outside parliament in Wellington, while about 500 attended at the Auckland War Memorial. Hundreds more took part in Christchurch, Dunedin, Palmerston North, Nelson, Whanganui, Thames, Timaru and Napier.

The country takes just 750 refugees per year, the 87th lowest intake in the world on a per capita basis. Following an outpouring of public support for the people fleeing war in the Middle East, the National Party government announced an "emergency" intake of 600 Syrian refugees over the next two-and-a-half years.

This plan and rival proposals by the Labour and Green Parties to accept a handful more Syrian refugees and raise the annual quota by 250 people are grossly inadequate responses to the worst refugee crisis since the World War II. Four million people have fled Syria and more than seven million have been displaced within the country by the war waged by various US-backed Islamist militias, and Islamic State (ISIS), to overthrow the Assad regime.

There is widespread outrage over the government's response to the crisis, but the organisers of the vigils sought to contain opposition within the narrow confines of parliamentary politics. Spokespersons for Amnesty International and the liberal activist group ActionStation suggested only that the annual quota be doubled to 1,500 refugees.

Addressing the crowd in Wellington, Amnesty International's New Zealand executive director Grant Bayldon praised Prime Minister John Key's decision to accept a miniscule number of Syrian refugees, calling it "an important but long overdue first step." He declared that "this should not be a partisan-political issue," while at the same time thanking a group of Labour and Green MPs who had "come out to show their support."

In Wellington and Auckland, former asylum seekers and high school students spoke movingly about the plight of refugees. Yet Bayldon offered no criticism of the government and opposition parties for supporting the US-led interventions that have devastated Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and other countries, triggering the refugee crisis.

Bayldon did not mention Key's statement on Wednesday supporting the Australian government's decision to extend its bombing operations from Iraq into Syria. Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott has also not ruled out sending in ground troops. According to the *New Zealand Herald*, Key said: "We can understand Australia doing what they're doing."

Asked if New Zealand's elite SAS troops could help identify targets for air strikes in Syria, as they did previously in Afghanistan, Key hinted that this was possible. He told the media on Thursday: "For the most part we're not doing that in Syria... They're not working on that at the moment. We always from time to time have people who move around from one place [to another] but we haven't deployed them or anything."

Labour Party MP Grant Robertson and former Green Party co-leader Russel Norman attended the Wellington vigil, but remained silent. At a senior citizens' group meeting in Whanganui, Labour leader Andrew Little called for the government to take a few more refugees. "The most vulnerable of people are looking to countries like New Zealand, countries with reputations as good global citizens, and hoping to see us show some courage," he stated.

Like the ruling National Party, however, both opposition parties support US imperialism, including its

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drive to control oil-rich Iraq and Syria. On Thursday morning, the Labour leader told Newstalk ZB he "supported air strikes in Iraq," but the war in Syria was currently too "complex" for him to support bombing. He said it was "pretty hard to pick" whether to bomb the Assad regime or ISIS. Labour and the Greens both supported the war in Afghanistan and have previously indicated they would back military intervention to overthrow Assad if the UN Security Council rubberstamped it.

Far from being a "good global citizen"—a claim constantly echoed by the media and every establishment party—successive National and Labour-led governments have been brutal toward refugees and immigrants. A Socialist Equality Group statement distributed at the Wellington vigil, "New Zealand political leaders feign sympathy for refugees," outlined this history of racist discrimination and disregard for human rights, which remains the hallmark of the bourgeoisie.

The statement called for working people to have the right to live wherever they choose. It indicted Labour, the Greens and the Maori nationalist Mana Party for supporting the xenophobic New Zealand First Party and assisting its ongoing campaign to scapegoat Chinese immigrants for the worsening social crisis, including the soaring cost of housing.

The aim of this campaign is to divide the working class and prevent a unified struggle against the capitalist system, which is the source of austerity and war. It also assists the integration of New Zealand into Washington's military encirclement and preparations for war against China.

Socialist Equality Group supporters spoke to some participants in the Wellington event.

Kate, a student at Victoria University, said she had come "to show support for refugees because they have the right to escape from war." She added: "The decision to accept 600 refugees is pathetic, considering that there are 60 million refugees around the world. Other countries take thousands and we should take a lot more."

Kate agreed that the government's profession of sympathy for refugees was hypocritical, "especially since they support the war in Syria. How is bombing Syria going to help the refugees?"

Ibrahim, a student and former refugee from Eritrea, said: "The New Zealand government's response to the refugee crises is appalling and John Key needs to be ashamed of himself. The whole world is responding. It took public pressure, including from his allies and his supporters, for him to accept 600 refugees. That is a good step, but not enough." Ibrahim called for the refugee quota to be doubled.

Asked about the bombing of Syria, Ibrahim replied: "There is no country that should go into another country and drop bombs, whatever the excuse is. The only reason we have this mess and crisis today is because of some countries' interventions in the internal issues of other countries. The Syrian war clearly has become a proxy war between the superpowers and their supporters. This needs to be ceased. The military support for both sides needs to stop immediately."

Jeff, a bank worker, said he came to the protest because he was "disappointed in our government's cynical response to the challenges presented. We are told that refugees will become a financial burden, which in my view is completely irrelevant—a humanitarian crisis is ongoing and I consider it is the duty of those who have a lot to help those who have little. If the government can find money to send troops to Iraq, change flags, and the required lobbying to chair the UN Security Council, then there is certainly money available.

"I visited Syria in April 2010 and was struck by the openness, progressiveness, and overall hospitality of the Syrian people I met—a far cry from the 'Axis of Evil' designation bestowed upon them by Bush. I can't help but feel that if the roles in this situation were reversed, they would be doing more for us than we are currently doing for them."

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