

New Zealand: Socialist Aotearoa supports US-led war in Syria

Tom Peters
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A few hundred people attended a rally in central Auckland on Saturday, entitled “Welcome 10,000 Now,” to demand that New Zealand accept 10,000 more refugees.

In response to an outpouring of public support for refugees fleeing war in the Middle East, the National Party government recently agreed to accept a so-called “emergency intake” of just 600 extra refugees on top of the country’s annual UN quota of 750. This quota has not been raised in nearly 30 years and is the 87th lowest in the world.

A diverse audience including students, workers and former refugees from many parts of the world attended the protest at Aotea Square, which raised funds for the Auckland Refugee Council. It followed demonstrations the previous week in Wellington, Christchurch and many smaller centres, which called for an increase in the refugee quota.

The September 19 event was addressed by many people, including refugees from Burma, Sudan, Kurdistan, Iraq and Palestine, who spoke about the terrible conditions in their countries and called for New Zealand to take more refugees.

However, the most significant aspect of the rally, from a political standpoint, was the cynical role played by its main organiser, Socialist Aotearoa. While professing concern for refugees and occasionally mouthing socialist phrases, this middle class pseudo-left organisation supports US intervention in Syria. It has echoed the positions of similar groups internationally, including the US-based International Socialist Organisation, Socialist Alternative in Australia, the New Anti-Capitalist Party in France and the British Socialist Workers Party (with which Socialist Aotearoa is politically affiliated).

In 2012, Socialist Aotearoa published several

statements, some produced by the SWP, which falsely presented the Islamist militias fighting the regime of Bashar al-Assad as the leaders of a “revolution.” In reality the so-called “rebels” including the Al Qaeda-affiliated Al Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham, and the Free Syrian Army, have received billions of dollars in weapons from the US and its allies Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

The terrorist group Islamic State (ISIS) also grew thanks to the support it received from US allies in the Gulf to wage war against Assad. Washington has used the rise of ISIS and its conquest of large parts of Syria and Iraq as a further pretext for war in both countries. The objective of the American ruling elite is to establish permanent control over the entire oil-rich region (see: “Poll shows 81 percent of Syrians believe US created ISIS”).

Notwithstanding a few rhetorical denunciations of imperialism, Saturday’s rally continued Socialist Aotearoa’s promotion of the US-sponsored war.

A spokesperson from the group Syrian Solidarity New Zealand, Abdul Elah, was invited to address the Auckland rally to argue for direct military intervention in support of these reactionary forces. This group, which has received a large amount of media attention, has made numerous calls for “humanitarian” intervention.

Elah dismissed suggestions that ISIS bore any responsibility for the crisis in Syria, which he blamed entirely on the Assad regime. He called on the “international community and the United States [to] please make a no fly zone.”

The “no fly zone” imposed by the United Nations Security Council over Libya in 2011 provided the pretext for a NATO bombing campaign that killed at least 50,000 people and assisted Washington’s proxies,

including Islamist groups, to overthrow Muammar Gaddafi. Libyan society has completely disintegrated as a result of the war, with rival warlords fighting each other for control of the country.

Elah's speech amounted to a plea for similar intervention in Syria. This was greeted with a call for applause by Socialist Aotearoa leader Joe Carolan, who added: "Never in the course of history have so many people been abandoned. It's disgusting, we should be furious about what's happening there."

Carolan described the Syrian people as "victims in an imperialist game" and denounced the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the billions spent on "supporting dictators in the Middle East," including Saudi Arabia. He also praised the Kurdish militias fighting ISIS in Kobani. But he remained silent on the Obama administration's renewed war in Iraq and Syria and did not refer to the New Zealand government's decision to send 140 soldiers to Iraq this year. Socialist Aotearoa's blog has made no comment on the deployment.

Nor did Carolan or any other speaker mention the Australian government's decision this month to send warplanes to assist the US bombing of targets in Syria—a move that NZ Prime Minister John Key pointedly refused to criticise.

These omissions reflect the fact that Socialist Aotearoa supports the imperialist intervention. Indeed Carolan's declaration that the Syrian people have been abandoned is an argument for an even greater use of US military force.

Carolan gave a warm welcome to opposition Labour Party MP Jacinda Ardern and Green MP Marama Davidson, who he introduced as "speakers from the left." The MPs were allowed to shamelessly posture as supporters of refugees, while Carolan declared it was "great to see Labour here" and hailed Davidson as "an MP for the people and the social movements."

Both opposition parties have merely called for the government to increase the refugee intake quota by a miniscule 250 people per year. Moreover, Ardern and Davidson are not "from the left" but from parties of big business that support New Zealand's alliance with US imperialism. The 1999–2008 Labour government sent troops to join the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. The deployment to Afghanistan was backed by the Greens.

Labour leader Andrew Little told Newstalk ZB on

September 10 that he "supported air strikes in Iraq." On the same day that Ardern spoke in Auckland, feigning sympathy for "those who find themselves in conflict and hardship," the *Dominion Post* published an interview with Labour's foreign affairs spokesman David Shearer calling for military intervention in Syria.

While bombing would "degrade ISIS's ability to hold on to territory," Shearer said, "[y]ou cannot defeat ISIS unless you're on the ground." He denounced Russia for vetoing UN Security Council resolutions that would have paved the way for a military invasion.

Socialist Aotearoa's craven embrace of these pro-imperialist parties comes as no surprise. The organisation is integrated into the Maori nationalist Mana Party, which campaigned in an alliance with the pro-business Internet Party and in support of Labour, the Greens and the xenophobic New Zealand First Party in last year's election.

While Socialist Aotearoa now claims to welcome foreigners, it has said nothing about Mana's support for Labour and New Zealand First's long-running anti-Chinese campaign. In March, Mana assisted New Zealand First leader Winston Peters' by-election campaign in Northland, while in July it joined Labour in scapegoating Chinese people for the housing crisis.

In 2011, Socialist Aotearoa published an article which—turning reality on its head—painted China as an aggressive power that wanted to colonise New Zealand and the South Pacific. It called for a bloc with the US military against China—something that all the opposition parties now support as part of the integration of New Zealand into Obama's aggressive "pivot to Asia" directed against Beijing.

Socialist Aotearoa is a misnamed organisation. It is a middle-class nationalist group, integrated into the trade union bureaucracy and political establishment, whose role is to provide an increasingly threadbare "left" cover for pro-imperialist and pro-war policies.



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