

Vicious media campaign in New Zealand over child abuse

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The death of Moko Rangitoheriri, aged 3, has been seized on by the media and political establishment to launch a campaign directed against the most impoverished and economically deprived sections of New Zealand's population.

On August 10 last year, the child was taken by ambulance to Taupo Hospital with multiple internal and external injuries, consistent with a series of severe beatings. He died later that night.

Nicola Dally-Paki, Moko's mother, had placed her son and 8-year-old daughter in the care of David Haerewa, 43, and his partner Tania Shailer, 26, who lived in Taupo with four of Shailer's own children. Dally-Paki arranged with Shailer to take the children while she looked after her eldest son, who was in hospital after breaking his leg.

On May 2, Haerewa and Shailer pleaded guilty to manslaughter charges at Rotorua High Court. They will be sentenced on June 27. The Child, Youth and Family (CYF) agency has removed Dally-Paki's remaining two children from her care.

Shailer had met social workers from CYF and the Maori Women's Refuge days before Moko's death, saying she was "not coping" with caring for six children. The agencies knew Haerewa had a previous conviction for domestic violence against Shailer, but no one was sent to check on the children.

Social Development Minister Anne Tolley deflected criticism of the agency, saying anyone who questioned CYF's competence should "look at themselves in the mirror and ask what they could have done to save this wee boy."

People throughout the country have been horrified by the crime and want to know how it could have occurred. Gruesome details of the abuse Moko suffered have been endlessly repeated in the media, but there has

been little attempt to probe the social conditions that led to the tragedy.

Thirteen children died in New Zealand during 2015 in similar circumstances. Their average age was three. Over half the victims were Maori, one of the most exploited layers of the New Zealand working class. In the final analysis, the abuse and neglect inflicted on young children is a product of staggering levels of poverty, social breakdown and family dislocation.

In order to prevent an understanding of the deeper causes of the tragedy, politicians and the media have demonised not just the couple responsible for Moko's death, but an entire "underclass" of impoverished welfare recipients.

Maori people, in particular, have been blamed for a "culture of violence" in families. The hysterical moralising and implicit racism in much of the media coverage has been aimed at deflecting attention from the responsibility of successive governments of all stripes for the worsening social crisis facing the entire working class.

Broadcaster Duncan Garner proclaimed in his *Dominion Post* column on May 7 that child abuse was "the product of the underclass ... [who] live in third and fourth generation benefit families." He wrote: "They were beaten, and their parents were beaten and so it continues. They have not been shown love ... they have no idea how to be parents. Monsters breed more monsters."

Garner denounced the manslaughter charge as a "perverse plea bargain" that allowed the couple to get away with torture and murder. Comparing them to ISIS terrorists, he said they were "not humans, they are monsters and cowards and they need to be inside for decades."

In another column on May 21, Garner declared:

“Short of stopping these people breeding, we need to teach them what the generations before have failed to do.” He called on readers to join a “march for Moko” at the court when Haerewa and Shailer appear for sentencing.

Right-wing commentator and author Alan Duff wrote in the *New Zealand Herald* that “some Maori have no moral values because they’re not taught them.” Duff advocated pushing “a few more up into the educated or business-owning bracket,” i.e. to emulate entrepreneurs, rugby players and television producers and actors. He intoned: “You can bet those hideous child-killer monsters were never exposed to any positive, can-do attitude. No. They grew up on a diet of abuse.”

In fact, the cultivation of a small privileged layer of Maori through ethnic “empowerment” is exactly what the political establishment has done over the past two decades. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been handed over in land settlements to establish tribal-based Maori business entities.

Its purpose, however, has been to divide workers on ethnic lines and use the tiny, well-off Maori stratum to suppress the resistance by Maori workers. As a result, the majority of Maori, who have borne the brunt of successive industry closures, have seen their living standards decimated, with thousands condemned to entrenched poverty, desperation and cultural backwardness.

A series of marches against domestic violence and child abuse took place on May 22. Mother of two Karis Vesey, who initiated the campaign, told Maori television she was “stirred to do something” after reading Garner’s articles. At the centre of the protests were demands that “men” and Maori apologise and “take responsibility” for abuse.

At the Auckland rally, Labour Party justice spokeswoman Jacinda Arden echoed the media and the Sensible Sentencing Trust, a right-wing “law and order” lobby group. She railed against the fact that half of those found guilty for child deaths were convicted of manslaughter instead of murder. Maori Party MP Marama Fox, who is part of the conservative National Party-led coalition government, said “our whole nation has taken the lives of our children for too long.”

No one in the media has called for the political establishment to “take responsibility” for the root

causes of child abuse. Decades of attacks on living standards have brutalised the most vulnerable sections of the population, creating a mental health crisis. There were a record 564 suicides reported in 2015, many connected to poverty and unemployment. Maori, who represent about 15 percent of the population, made up 23 percent of the suicides.

No one has asked if those at the centre of the Moko Rangitoheriri case were psychologically disturbed and in need of help. Funding for healthcare and counselling services has been drastically cut. The mentally ill were previously on sickness benefits but have been forced to look for work as part of government policies to push people off welfare.

Particular responsibility rests with the Labour Party and the trade unions, which, in the 1980s, began the 30-year assault on the social position of working people. From 1980 to 1990, mostly under the Lange Labour government, the share of gross domestic product going to income earners dropped from 60 percent to 50 percent. The social reversal has accelerated due to the austerity measures imposed since the 2008 economic crisis. According to Labour’s own figures, workers’ share of economic growth has now plummeted to 37 percent.

The unfolding crisis is affecting ever-growing numbers of people. Last December, the Children’s Commissioner reported that the number of children living in poverty increased from 24 to 29 percent, or 305,000 children, in the space of one year. The rate almost doubled from 15 percent in 1984. Meanwhile, welfare services have been slashed to the bone, and more than 30,000 people are homeless or living in overcrowded or makeshift accommodation, including many families with children.



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