

New Zealand: Peace Action Wellington endorses Anzac Day

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Following Anzac Day commemorations in New Zealand on April 25, the media seized on an incident at the Wellington dawn ceremony to initiate a “debate” over whether political protests should be allowed on what is increasingly promoted as the country’s “sacred” national day.

Members of Peace Action Wellington laid a wreath at the cenotaph for victims of a NZ Special Air Service raid in Afghanistan. A recent book, *Hit and Run*, presented evidence that the elite troops carried out an assault on a defenceless village in 2010 that killed six people, including a three-year-old girl, and wounded 15 others. The pacifist group is calling for an independent inquiry to establish whether a war crime occurred.

Peace Action representative Laura Drew told TV3 the group wanted to “draw attention to the fact that it’s civilians who are overwhelmingly the casualties of war ... [W]ar is a big tragedy and it’s awful that soldiers died and it’s awful that civilians died, so remembering both is appropriate.”

The occasion took what the *New Zealand Herald* declared an “ugly turn” when an on-camera interview was interrupted by the chief-of-staff of the right-wing NZ First Party, David Broome, and his 12-year-old son James. The boy was filmed berating protesters: “Do it tomorrow, do it the day before, do it any day but today it is wrong, wrong, wrong.” Broome senior told the protesters their actions left a “sour taste.”

Later, NZ First defence spokesman Ron Mark, a former army officer, told the media: “Anzac Day is a sacred day for commemoration and reflection and using it for protest is inappropriate.” Party leader Winston Peters denounced the protest as “disrespectful.”

Peace Action issued an immediate apology. In a letter published in the *Dominion Post* on April 28, spokesperson Ellie Clayton said the group’s presence

at the dawn service “was not a protest against the event.” Rather, “we participated respectfully in the ceremony” to remind people “that it’s not just soldiers who die in conflict.” Clayton thanked the organisers for “allowing us to participate.”

The annual dawn ceremony commemorates the landing of Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) troops on the Gallipoli peninsula in Turkey in 1915. Military-led services and parades are conducted in both countries and at Gallipoli. The Australian and New Zealand governments have given the day increasing prominence, while spending hundreds of millions of dollars on events and monuments linked with the centenary of World War I.

In Australia, this year’s Anzac Day saw a witch-hunt of Australian Broadcasting Corporation commentator Yassmin Abdel-Magied for a Facebook post that referred to Australia’s persecution of refugees, the war in Syria and the oppression of the Palestinians. Senior government and opposition Labor Party spokesmen denounced Abdel-Magied, with some calling for the public broadcaster to sack her.

Such moves to proscribe the right to protest are a conscious preparation for the suppression of popular resistance to the build-up to war, including against North Korea, China and Russia, led by the US Trump administration and supported by the New Zealand and Australian ruling elites.

Peace Action Wellington was founded in the lead-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. It is a loose alliance of politically heterogeneous forces, including anarchists, trade union officials and academics, that promote pacifism along with New Zealand exceptionalism and nationalism. They are united by hostility to the fight for revolutionary socialist leadership and the political independence of the working class from all capitalist

parties and organisations. The group collaborates with the pseudo-left groups, the International Socialist Organisation, Fightback and Redline.

Peace Action's response to the denunciations of its protest is both revealing and significant. Far from opposing the entire framework of the Anzac celebrations, the drive to authoritarianism and the urgent threat of nuclear war, the middle-class pacifist group abjectly capitulated to the government's war propaganda.

Clayton's letter expressed sympathy for the victims of war and described WWI as "senseless," but did not denounce the ongoing imperialist war in Afghanistan or the drive toward a third World War.

Peace Action's aim was to be included in what is a pro-war commemoration. The group's letter joined in the glorification of Anzac Day by claiming it had an "anti-war stance implicit in its roots." According to Clayton, it was "originally a day of remembrance by and for veterans of the First World War, to remember their comrades who were killed and the senselessness of war."

This is a blatant falsification of history. The first Anzac Day in 1916 was held, in the words of then Prime Minister William Massey, to encourage "patriotic meetings" and praise the "notable deeds" of Australian and NZ soldiers in the battle of Gallipoli, "with a view to assisting the recruiting campaign."

The desperate political campaign was made necessary as opposition to the slaughter in Europe became widespread. Following reports of thousands of deaths, particularly at Gallipoli, enlistments began to fall sharply and anti-war sentiment spread throughout the working class. Massey's conservative government imposed conscription in 1916, which became widely hated. The government cracked down on dissent and imprisoned hundreds of conscientious objectors. The Labour Party was established the same year to contain the growing anti-war opposition in the working class.

The Anzac Day Act of 1920, which made the day a public holiday, stated that it was "in memory of those who gave their lives for the Empire" during WWI.

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In every subsequent conflict—from World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War and the current imperialist wars—Anzac Day has been a tool of the

government and the military to encourage young people to enlist to fight.

Peace Action, according to its own statement, makes no protest against this. Its letter said nothing about the pro-war speeches given by Prime Minister Bill English and Governor-General Patsy Reddy, who glorified NZ's involvement in the Korean War, Malaya, Vietnam and the current war in Iraq, dressing up these neo-colonial wars as humanitarian interventions. Peace Action's attitude toward such war propaganda is "respectful."

The perspective of Peace Action Wellington does not represent any way forward in the struggle against war. The group's letter is a meek appeal for compromise with the military and the ruling class, which are preparing the country for new and even more devastating wars.

This is in keeping with Peace Action's previous activities, including protests last November against a visit by a US warship. The group's Auckland branch organised a "Week of Peace" which promoted the Labour Party and its ally the Greens, falsely presenting them as opponents of war. In fact, both parties agree with the alliance with US imperialism, increased military spending and NZ's participation in the war in Afghanistan (see: "'Week of Peace' promotes the Greens and Labour").

Under conditions in which the old protest organisations have discredited themselves, Peace Action Wellington is seeking to steer workers and youth who are becoming radicalised by the drive to war into channels that pose no real threat to militarism and the capitalist order.



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