

New Zealand: Labour-led government to expand police

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After taking office on October 26, the new Labour Party-led New Zealand government, which includes the anti-immigrant NZ First Party and the Greens, has quickly moved to strengthen police and their powers.

As part of the coalition deal between Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and NZ First leader Winston Peters, 1,800 new officers are to be recruited. This is a 20 percent increase on the 2016 figure of 9,004 police, in a country of just 4.7 million people. Peters also wants to establish an elite flying squad to target “rampant outbreaks of lawlessness and organised crime.”

NZ First has repeatedly attacked Labour and the former National government for not being tough on crime. Its law-and-order proposals include making minors as young as 12 years old “criminally responsible” for their actions and expanding military-run “boot camps” for young offenders.

Last week, the New Zealand media widely promoted a new police recruitment video. *Newshub* praised it, declaring that key themes in police recruitment were “empathy and community.”

However, a recent investigative report by Fairfax Media entitled “Under Fire: Why are more people being shot by cops?” highlighted the extraordinary powers of the police and their disregard for human life.

The report revealed that police shot more people in the past 10 years than the previous 40. Over the last decade, 16 people have been killed by police, compared with a total of 31 since 1941. Since 2015, 14 people have been shot, eight fatally.

By contrast, in the United Kingdom, which has a population 13 times the size, police have fatally shot 22 people in the past 10 years. In every single case, New Zealand police officers have been protected from criminal charges.

The victims have typically been poor, working class

people, whose lives have been destroyed by the social ills of capitalism: unemployment, indebtedness, drug addiction and mental illness.

While NZ police are officially unarmed, all frontline officers carry a pistol and carbine in their vehicles that can be used anytime an officer feels “threatened” by an “aggressive” person. Police currently have 2,414 pistols and 2,414 M4 rifles.

The 2008 introduction of Tasers by a previous Labour government has not reduced the number of people killed or wounded by police firearms—the main justification for their deployment. Tasers have become more widely used, with repeated complaints of excessive force by officers.

In January then-chairman of the Independent Police Conduct Authority (IPCA), David Carruthers, announced a “special inquiry” into the spate of killings which, he said, were concerning “for all thinking New Zealanders.” Another investigation in 2018 will focus on the availability of weapons rather than how officers use them.

The IPCA, which is part of the same state apparatus as the police, consistently defends police killings as “justified.” The organisation only has the authority to gather evidence and make disciplinary action recommendations, not prosecute officers.

The “Under Fire” report cites case studies critical of police procedures and operations and highlights the lack of any official accountability for what are often cold-blooded killings.

Unarmed David Cerven, 21, was shot and killed in Auckland in August 2015. An officer fired five rounds from his rifle, two bullets hitting Cerven, while another armed with a pistol missed with three shots. Cerven, who was wanted for suspected aggravated robbery, was clearly in a psychologically distressed state.

Nicholas Taylor, a lawyer specialising in firearms law, told Fairfax Media that the two police officers should have been criminally prosecuted. He said they worsened the situation by charging into a “chaotic, disorganised” stand-off, talked about “spraying rounds” and then “Rambo-like pulled the trigger... and hoped they’d hit something.” Taylor notes that police are routinely trained to aim “at the central chest area every single time”, when other options should be pursued.

Stephen Bellingham, 37 was shot dead by a police officer in Christchurch in 2007 after smashing cars with a claw hammer. He confronted a police officer with the hammer and was shot while advancing. The officer did not tell the police communications centre he was armed and intended to confront Bellingham, nor did he give directions to two other officers who were responding to the call.

Fairfax Media’s investigation notes that the police who killed Cerven and Bellingham had dashed in, created a confrontation and opened fire without contacting other nearby officers, a dispatcher-in-charge or their communication centres. In both cases other options were ignored including longer negotiations, cordoning-off the entire area and waiting for back-up.

Queen’s Counsel Colin Pidgeon who represented Bellingham’s parents sought to pursue criminal charges against the officer, but the case never proceeded after years of stonewalling by police. Bellingham’s father was angered by comments by Greg O’Connor, the then-Police Association president and now a Labour government MP, that he would “back their man all the way through.”

O’Connor regularly defended police violence, demanded officers be armed and attacked criticism of police shootings as “unreasonable”, saying people had to get used to more officers “having to make these decisions.”

Responding to the report, Police Superintendent Chris Scabhill downplayed the spike in numbers, saying: “We shot at six people last year out of millions of interactions with the public—I reckon it’s pretty low...”

In fact, as in the United States and elsewhere, the unrelenting increase in police shootings in New Zealand is a direct product of the growth of social inequality and intensification of class tensions.

A graph in the report highlights historical spikes in

the number of people shot or wounded by police. Significantly, they occurred in 1916 during widespread civil unrest in World War 1, again in the aftermath of the 2008 global economic crisis, and once more over the last four years.

With social upheavals on the horizon, the incoming Labour-led government is preparing to defend the wealth, power and privileges of the ruling elite by laying the framework for police-state rule.



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