

Thousands of New Zealand students join climate change protests

Our reporters
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In the largest political mobilisation of young people for many years, tens of thousands of students from schools around New Zealand took to the streets on Friday to protest the ecological crisis. Around 40 demonstrations were organised in cities and regional centres as part of the Youth Climate Strikes occurring worldwide, urging politicians to treat climate change as a crisis and act to protect young people's futures from its effects.

In Wellington more than 2,000 students, parents and supporters gathered in Civic Square before marching to parliament. In Auckland, thousands rallied in Aotea Square, with a similar number in Christchurch. In Dunedin, hundreds chanted “not enough” after a speech by the Labour Party’s Health Minister, David Clark, in which he listed policies the government is implementing, purportedly to tackle climate change.

The students’ demands included the immediate passing of an “ambitious and effective” Zero Carbon Act, fast-tracking “well planned and transparent” emission targets, ending the extraction of fossil fuels, substantial investments in renewable energy and regulating emissions from agriculture, which account for half of New Zealand’s emissions.

In the lead-up to the strike more than 1,000 academics, teachers and researchers signed an open letter expressing their support. Victoria University lecturer Amanda Thompson told TVNZ that the “object of protest is to be disruptive” and the government should take it seriously. “If we do nothing,” she declared, “it becomes a crisis.”

Notwithstanding the widespread support, students had to defy pressure by the media and school principals. Following a direction by the Ministry of Education, principals threatened that anyone who attended without their parents’ permission would be deemed truant, with

possible serious “repercussions.” Secondary Principals Association President Michael Williams declared: “We’re concerned that students are wasting good learning time.”

In one hostile interview, radio host Sean Plunket accused protest leader Sophie Handford of “encouraging people to break the law.” Handford rejected Plunket’s assertion it was “just an excuse for kids to take the day off.” “We have the right to fight for our future. We have the right to a secure future and a safe climate future,” she declared.

Several politicians treated the students with open contempt. Opposition National Party leader Simon Bridges said the strikes would be “a couple of chants as they march along, and then maybe McDonald’s afterwards.” Fellow National MP Judith Collins declared that “their little protest is not going to help the world one bit.” The Deputy Prime Minister and leader of the NZ First Party in the governing coalition, Winston Peters, added: “We pay a lot of money for people to get educated. Attending school is compulsory in this country.”

However, as it became clear that the strike would attract enormous support, the Labour Party and its other coalition partner, the Green Party, moved to channel sentiment into pro-establishment, parliamentary channels.

In New Plymouth, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern turned up unannounced to address a gathering of about 200 people. Ardern was in the town for another engagement, but reportedly made a “quick detour” to the protest, telling the students: “It is the biggest challenge we will tackle globally in my lifetime and in your lifetime.”

Outside parliament, Greens leader and minister for climate change James Shaw demagogically declared

that New Zealand needed legally binding emissions reduction targets to hold politicians to account.

The Labour-Greens-NZ First government has sought to divert attention away from the real cause of pollution: the profit system. It advocates market-based policies, such as an emissions trading scheme and subsidies for “green” businesses, which do not seriously impinge on the activities of big polluting companies. Shaw told school students in Wellington the day before the strike that the government would not interfere with “existing property rights” of oil and gas companies who hold current exploration permits.

The Socialist Equality Group spoke to participants in the Wellington protest and distributed copies of the *World Socialist Web Site* perspective, “The Youth Climate Strike and the fight against global warming.”

Josh, from Wellington High School, said: “Science shows that we only have 12 years to reverse the major effects that we’ve done to the earth. In my opinion we need to use as little fossil fuels as we can and use a lot more renewable energy, and less plastic.

“The National Party have been saying students should be in school. Well, the only reason we’re not in school today is because they’re not doing anything. This government has done a few things, but not a lot.

“I’m not here for New Zealand. I’m here for the planet. There’s no Planet B, there’s nowhere else we can go. We only have one shot at this, trying to prevent a mass extinction of animals and humans alike.

“Socialism can work, you need to actually make it work. Capitalism has made monopoly after monopoly and huge companies can just do whatever the hell they want and pollute the planet to the extent that we can’t do anything.”

Wellington College student **Ugrin**, originally from Serbia, said governments had not taken action because of the “material cost for companies and firms. When governments subsidise firms they have to make sure that firms are profitable so they can pay back the subsidies. So I do think that profit is one of the factors as to why this hasn’t been happening as much as it should have.

“I’d like to say that if you really want to have an opinion about this, not a one-sided opinion based on propaganda, you should go out and research it on your own, as I have done myself. I’ve watched some videos of scientists such as Brian Cox. He’s talked about

models on the aftermath of climate change. It can be damaging to not just us, as a species, but other animals and plants. When we run out of all of these resources we will have none to use to survive.”

Morgan, from Paraparaumu College, and **Max**, from Kapiti College, said many students from their schools were taking part. Morgan said she was protesting because “I owe it to the environment of the planet and those who come after me. There’s going to be a point where we can’t go back and we can’t fix anything. I don’t think politicians have raised their voices enough to make it a big enough issue, which is why we’ve had to do this.”

Morgan responded to those berating the students for skipping school by saying “there’s not going to be any school” if climate change is not addressed. “It’s going to get to the point where action needs to be taken because it gets so bad and then the action that they do take isn’t going to fix what could be fixed now.”

Max said he was concerned about “the future of the children, to have a safe earth for them. We need to cut down on greenhouse gases and heal the ozone layer. There should definitely be some more young voices in the political world to put our position on the world stage.”



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