

After fascist attack, New Zealand government enacts gun control measures

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Just six days after the March 15 Christchurch mosque shootings in which a fascist killed 50 people, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern last week announced a ban on military style, semi-automatic guns and assault rifles.

Ardern declared: “On 15 March our history changed forever. Now, our laws will too. We are announcing action today on behalf of all New Zealanders to strengthen our gun laws and make our country a safer place.” Changes to the law in the aftermath of the 1990 Aramoana massacre, when a local resident shot and killed 13 people, did not go far enough, Ardern said.

The Labour Party-led government’s legislation, which has full cross-party support, will be introduced under urgency procedures when parliament sits next week. Under an Order in Council, the ban on trading and use of such weapons came into force immediately.

The population remains shocked by the horrific events that unfolded in Christchurch. On March 22, people observed an official call for two minutes’ silence. Some 20,000 gathered in Christchurch and 15,000 in Dunedin to attend vigils in memory of the victims. The widespread anger over the shooting, and sympathy for its victims, is being channelled toward gun control for definite political purposes.

International media coverage seized on the initiative, as well as moves to restrict freedom of expression on social media platforms, to praise Ardern’s “inspirational leadership.” A glowing March 21 editorial in the *New York Times*, entitled “America Deserves a Leader as Good as Jacinda Ardern,” proclaimed that “the world should learn from the way Jacinda Ardern... has responded to the horror.”

Democratic Party members who are falsely presented as “lefts” also applauded her. Presidential aspirant Bernie Sanders posted on Twitter: “This is what real

action to stop gun violence looks like. We must follow New Zealand’s lead, take on the NRA [National Rifle Association] and ban the sale and distribution of assault weapons in the United States.”

This campaign seeks to cover up the responsibility of the political establishment and the state in New Zealand, as well as in US, Europe and Australia, for fanning the growth of the far-right by stirring up anti-immigrant xenophobia and racism.

To present “gun control” as a solution to the type of far-right extremist violence unleashed in Christchurch is a fraud on many levels. As Brenton Tarrant’s manifesto makes clear, he planned his attack over a two-year period in a highly-disciplined and determined manner and was not wedded to using guns. Little has been said about the fact that two explosive devices were discovered on a car following Tarrant’s arrest.

Moreover, Tarrant had a long history of connections with known far-right groups and made his plans known online before the massacre, raising disturbing questions about why police and intelligence agencies did not prevent the attack.

Alongside the gun control measures, New Zealand’s chief censor banned Tarrant’s manifesto. This is an anti-democratic move aimed at preventing ordinary people from seeing the striking similarity of Tarrant’s racist and anti-Muslim rhetoric and that of the establishment political parties, most obviously NZ First, which is a coalition partner in the Labour-led government, alongside the Greens.

The focus on guns goes hand-in-hand with censorship. It aims to obscure the fact that successive Labour and National-led governments have overseen a social crisis since the 1980s and a quarter century of criminal US-led wars that has helped create the conditions for the re-emergence of fascism as an

international phenomenon.

As Tarrant's manifesto boasts, there is widespread sympathy for fascism in governments, the military, police and intelligence agencies. Yet the mass shooting is being exploited to bolster the powers and resources of the state apparatus.

The ruling elite views gun control as one way to expand police powers and prepare to suppress the growing struggles against deteriorating living standards and the drive to war. The law change coincides with a push to arm police with guns. New Zealand is one of a handful of countries where front-line officers do not routinely carry firearms, but in recent years this has begun to change. Killings by armed police have become more common.

Officially, Tarrant is the sole suspect in the Christchurch attack. Yet despite him being in custody, the country remains on a "high" threat alert, meaning a "terrorist attack is assessed as very likely." It is the first time New Zealand has had a high threat level, and it has been used to deploy police on the streets with semi-automatic weapons.

Under the new restrictions, weapons similar to those used in the terrorist attack will be outlawed. Related parts capable of converting guns into semi-automatics (MSSAs) also will be banned, along with high-capacity magazines. A buyback scheme will allow gun owners to return weapons. After a "reasonable time" those who continue to possess the guns could be prosecuted. Current gun law penalties are up to \$4,000 and/or three years in prison, but the new law would increase these.

On Monday, Police Minister Stuart Nash told TVNZ the immediate bans would be followed with laws to tighten vetting procedures, licensing and storage of weapons. Yet questions remain unanswered about why the police granted the Christchurch shooter a gun license, despite his many public statements on social media in support of fascists, and threats to kill "Marxists and globalists."

Ardern claimed Tarrant had exploited "loopholes" in the law. Police, however, said he obtained his license after being vetted. In late 2017, police interviewed him and also spoke to two referees who reportedly vouched for his character. Police have not revealed what they discussed with Tarrant, nor the identity of his referees. A former police firearms control officer, Joe Green, told the media that the referees were a father and son

whom the far-right extremist had met in an online forum.

All the parliamentary parties—government and opposition—have vowed to prevent a repeat of the atrocity, but for decades they have created the reactionary political climate that enable the rise of fascist groups. All of them have supported the bogus "war on terror," including the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, which have fuelled anti-Muslim xenophobia. The entire political establishment has backed immigration restrictions, suggesting that immigrants and refugees are to blame for the social crisis created by the austerity measures of successive governments.

Workers should oppose the strengthening of the state apparatus, which will inevitably be used against the struggles of the working class, as will the gangs of fascist thugs. The only way to end the threat of fascism is to abolish its root cause—the bankrupt and decaying capitalist system.



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