

Remembrance service held for New Zealand terror attack victims

Tom Peters
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Around 20,000 people attended a remembrance service at Hagley Park in Christchurch yesterday for the victims of the March 15 terrorist attack on the Al Noor and Linwood mosques, carried out by Australian fascist Brenton Tarrant. The gunman murdered 50 people, including young children, and injured the same number. Twenty-two people remain in hospital, three of them in critical condition.

The event, which follows several vigils in New Zealand and Australia, demonstrated once again the immense sympathy for the victims, opposition to racism and bigotry, and anger that such an attack could have taken place. Hundreds of people gathered in Wellington and Dunedin to watch the Christchurch service broadcast live, and an afternoon service was held in Auckland.

Speeches were given by Muslim religious leaders, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and Governor-General Patsy Reddy, and performances by musicians Yusuf Islam/Cat Stevens, Marlon Williams, Maisey Rika, Hollie Smith and Teeks. Representatives from 59 governments attended.

In a moving speech, survivor Farid Ahmed, whose wife was killed at the Al Noor mosque, called for peace and forgiveness: “Our attitude should be that we are one family, regardless of faith, religion, culture and language,” he said.

The NZ and Australian governments, however, exploited the event to continue their efforts to cover up the responsibility of the political establishment for creating the conditions that led to the attack, by whipping up xenophobia and racism to justify war and divide the working class. Political leaders sought to channel anger over the atrocity into demands for greater censorship of social media.

Ardern, Reddy and Christchurch mayor Lianne

Dalziel used their speeches to hail the police response to the attacks. There has been no explanation, however, of why Tarrant was not prevented from carrying out the atrocity. He had links with far-right groups in Australia and Europe and made online comments threatening immigrants, Marxists and “globalists.” Two days before the attack he posted a picture of the Al Noor mosque on Facebook along with violent anti-Muslim threats. Nine minutes before the attack he emailed his intended targets to the Prime Minister’s Office and the media.

The morning of the Christchurch service, police commissioner Mike Bush dismissed questions from members of the Pakistani community about why the attacker was not intercepted after the Al Noor mosque shooting. Tarrant was able to drive five kilometres to the Linwood mosque to carry out a second massacre before being arrested while driving towards a third mosque. Speaking to Radio NZ, Bush denounced critics of the police, saying they had unspecified “agendas.”

Police mobilized hundreds of heavily armed officers in Christchurch and other cities during the service. Snipers were deployed near Hagley Park and a helicopter circled overhead. Some Australian police were flown in for the day to boost the numbers.

Ardern’s speech, which received a standing applause, was widely promoted internationally. The corporate media has hailed Ardern’s allegedly “flawless” handling of the aftermath of the attacks. Her image has been projected onto the world’s tallest building in Dubai and a petition launched in France calls for her nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Ardern described New Zealand as “a place that is diverse, that is welcoming, that is kind and compassionate... Racism exists, but it is not welcome here.” She made vague calls for a “collective response”

to end the “vicious cycle of extremism breeding extremism,” adding that the “job of combating hate” was not up to the “government alone.” Ardern suggested that ordinary people could prevent the right-wing extremism that led to the Christchurch attack through “daily acts of kindness.”

The *Sydney Morning Herald* said Ardern’s speech “brought New Zealand together” and Friday’s service showed “the ability of their country to meet the challenge that had been set for it.” New Zealand’s trade union-funded *Daily Blog* editor Martyn Bradbury declared that “the beauty, strength, compassion, grace and dignity [of] Jacinda... has made me prouder to be a Kiwi than any other single time in my life.”

The speech was, in fact, utterly hypocritical. The unrelenting, nationalist campaign to glorify Ardern is an attempt to bury the fact that the Labour Party has repeatedly blamed immigrants for unemployment, low wages, unaffordable housing and other aspects of the social crisis caused by capitalism. During Labour’s 2017 election campaign Ardern called for slashing immigration by 30,000 people a year (about 40 percent), declaring in one televised *Newshub* debate “we can’t house the people coming into New Zealand.”

Labour’s platform demanded an end to foreigners taking “jobs Kiwis can do” and restrictions on the right of foreign students to work. Ardern said she was “unapologetic” about this discriminatory policy.

Following the election, Ardern formed a coalition government with the right-wing, anti-immigrant New Zealand First Party and the Greens. Labour and the Greens had for years collaborated with NZ First, a party that has always attacked Asian immigrants and demonised Muslims as potential terrorists. NZ First leader Winston Peters, who Ardern made deputy prime minister and foreign minister, accompanied her to the Christchurch remembrance service, but did not speak.

Peters has refused to retract his inflammatory anti-Islamic comments, including a 2005 speech in which he said New Zealand was “losing tens of thousands of Kiwis and replacing them with people from an entirely different cultural background”—the same complaint made in Tarrant’s fascist manifesto, “The Great Replacement.”

The *Listener* magazine felt compelled to denounce Peters, comparing him to US President Donald

Trump—one of the fascist gunman’s idols—and suggesting he could no longer be foreign minister. The same editorial, however, hailed Ardern’s “compassion and calm resolve” and said nothing about Labour’s anti-immigrant demagoguery.

After the Christchurch service, Ardern warmly greeted Australian Prime Minister Morrison, a right-wing populist whose government has some of the most vicious anti-refugee policies in the world, which are backed by the entire Australian political establishment.

Morrison praised the New Zealand government, saying it had “responded to violence with peace.” In fact, both countries have soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq, where they have carried out atrocities against civilians. These US-led imperialist wars have been justified with anti-Muslim demagoguery which has helped create the toxic chauvinist atmosphere in which Tarrant developed his fascist views.

Morrison thanked Ardern for her “strong support” for his government’s crackdown on social media. Australia’s Liberal-National Coalition government—fully supported by Labor and the Greens—seized on the Christchurch terror attack to announce it will introduce fines and jail terms for social media executives that fail to remove content the state deems “abhorrent violent material.” The law would go further than most other countries in attacking freedom of expression on Facebook and other platforms.

Workers and young people should not be swept up by the nationalist propaganda promoting Ardern. Her “kindness” rhetoric is a façade behind which the Labour-led government is preparing—in lockstep with Washington and Canberra—to use the Christchurch attack to strengthen the powers of the police and intelligence agencies. Censorship and increased surveillance will not be used to prevent the rise of fascism, which is being fuelled internationally by the right-wing nationalist policies of the political establishment. Such measures will be used against the working class as it comes into struggle against war, soaring levels of social inequality and capitalism itself.



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