

Tens of thousands join climate strike in New Zealand

Tom Peters
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Tens of thousands of school students left classes and joined protests in cities and towns throughout New Zealand last Friday, as part of the second coordinated wave of school strikes this year, involving 119 countries. The protests, demanding action to address climate change and the environmental crisis, were also joined by significant numbers of workers and university students.

Protests were held at 24 locations around the country. Thousands of people staged a rally and lie-in on Queen Street and Aotea Square in central Auckland. In Wellington, students marched to parliament. Thousands more protested in Christchurch, Dunedin, Nelson, New Plymouth, Hamilton and other towns.

Friday's protests reflected a shift to the left among young people, which is part of a broader radicalisation of the working class internationally in opposition to climate change, soaring social inequality, and the growing dangers of war, dictatorship and fascism. A previous global school strike on March 15 also attracted tens of thousands of participants in New Zealand, but was overshadowed by the Christchurch terrorist attack that afternoon, in which a right-wing extremist killed 51 people.

The latest student strike occurred just days before a nationwide teachers' strike, scheduled for May 29. More than 52,000 primary and secondary teachers will today take part in one of the largest strikes in decades. They are demanding significant pay increases and improvements to staffing and resources, following a decade of austerity which has led to a crisis in public schools.

While some school administrations supported the student strike, others threatened to punish those taking part. Secondary Principals' Association president Michael Williams told *Newshub* that at his school,

Pakuranga College, students would be marked "absent, unjustified," and could receive a detention.

One Auckland strike organiser, Western Springs College student Luke Wijohn, told Radio NZ that some protesters were "risking detentions, risking losing credits, risking threats of suspensions" because "we're not going to have a future if we don't do more for climate change."

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, who heads the Labour-led government, posed as a supporter of the protests. The day before, Ardern met 12-year-old Christchurch student Lucy Gray, the convenor of School Strike 4 Climate (SS4C). They discussed the government's Zero Carbon Bill, currently before parliament, which sets a "goal" of eliminating greenhouse gases by 2050, excluding methane from livestock. Ardern claimed that the Bill would help to limit global warming to no more than 1.5 degrees.

The legislation, submitted by Green Party co-leader and Minister for Climate Change James Shaw, is supported by Labour, New Zealand First and the opposition National Party.

The Bill is essentially meaningless because none of its targets can be enforced. There is no mechanism to compel big business, the main source of pollution, to adopt clean energy and reduce emissions. A "Climate Change Commission" will be established to provide advice to governments and corporations, which will simply be ignored if the recommended actions affect profits.

Protest organisers who spoke outside parliament in Wellington criticised the legislation for not being "ambitious" enough. SS4C is demanding that the government "declare a climate emergency," legislate for zero carbon to be achieved 10 years earlier and penalise businesses that do not meet emission reduction

targets. The organisers, however, praised the Zero Carbon Bill as a good “first step” and have directed young people to “pressure” the government by making submissions to the parliamentary select committee.

Many protest leaders blamed the population as a whole for the climate crisis. One speaker exhorted the crowd to “eat less meat and dairy, use less plastic, consume less, buy less, fly less, drive less...” Others blamed the older generation, or the “white privilege” supposedly enjoyed by people of European descent.

Such positions are false and reactionary, and serve to divide the working class. They divert attention from the real problem: any effort to seriously address the ecological crisis is blocked by the capitalist system, in which every important decision is dictated by the super-wealthy elites in the world divided into competing nation states.

In contrast to SS4C and other groups such as the Greens-aligned Generation Zero, and Extinction Rebellion, many student protesters told the WWSWS that they agreed climate change could not be halted without abolishing capitalism.

Eli, from Samuel Marsden College in Whitby, said: “Despite how many protests there have been and how long people have demanded that parliament change their policies, nothing has happened. We need to do something about it because we really haven’t got much time left.”

Shana, Holly and Harley, from Heretaunga College in Upper Hutt, said they considered themselves socialists. Shana said, “I don’t think we’re able to vote in enough restrictions” on polluters and called for a “revolution.” In an ideal society, she said, if something is “bad for the majority of people then we wouldn’t do it.”

Holly said the Zero Carbon Bill’s target was “far too late” since studies have found there is a 12-year window to halt climate change. She also believed “capitalism is the root of the issue” and governments “keep approaching climate change with the same stupid solutions.” Harley added that “corporations have too much control” and capitalism “throws away all common sense and ethics in favour of profit.”

Joe and Flynn, from Wellington High School, said most of their classmates had joined the protest. Flynn said climate change was “melting the ice-caps and all the creatures on them will probably die and every place

will flood.” Joe added that “by the time we have kids this earth won’t be safe for them to live in. Governments are not doing enough. I haven’t heard anything that’s happened since the last strike.” He called for “stricter control over corporations. They just own way too much, they’ve got so much power.”

George, a geography student at Victoria University of Wellington, said “the environment is changing, some weather patterns are getting so vastly different. It’s something that we need to deal with or else we’re going to get famines, floods and droughts all across the globe.”

George said that “a very small number of companies” were responsible for the majority of carbon emissions in the atmosphere. He agreed that capitalism “definitely” had to be abolished, and that climate change could only be addressed with international planning.

Regarding the government’s legislation, he commented: “One thing I found concerning is there’s no real accountability in it, and also the fact that governments can buy carbon [credits] from other countries, so it’s kind of cheating.” Such “market-based” emissions trading schemes have completely failed to reduce the danger of climate change.



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