

Protest in New Zealand against US brutality towards refugees

Tom Peters
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Between 50 and 100 people, including students and workers, gathered outside the US embassy in Wellington last Thursday to protest against the appalling and inhuman conditions in US concentration camps, which are being filled with tens of thousands of refugees by the Trump administration.

The rally, called by Amnesty International (AI) and Mums 4 Refugees to coincide with the US Independence Day, demonstrated the growing international outrage and disgust at the brutal treatment of immigrants and refugees, including children. Several of those in attendance strongly criticised the New Zealand government, led by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, for being complicit in attacks on immigrants and refugees.

The gathering was one of several that have been held in support of immigrants since the March 15 Christchurch terrorist attack in which fascist Brenton Tarrant, an admirer of Donald Trump, killed 51 Muslim worshippers.

It followed a vigil the day before, also outside the US embassy, organised by Free Assange NZ as part of the global fight to free Julian Assange. The Trump administration is seeking to imprison the WikiLeaks founder on espionage charges for the “crime” of revealing US war crimes in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The corporate media ignored both events. Along with the political establishment, the media is seeking to bury discussion about the political roots of the Christchurch atrocity, including the culpability of the US, Australian and New Zealand governments in promoting war, racism and xenophobia.

Annaliese Johnston from Amnesty International told the gathering that people fleeing persecution and violence have “been met with imprisonment, oppression, hunger.” Children had been separated from

their parents and “forced to sleep on concrete floors,” without access to soap and blankets. “The multiple visits that have happened over the last few weeks have found what can only be described as completely inhumane and illegal conditions,” she said.

Johnston explained that AI had documented how humanitarian volunteers, members of clergy, journalists and lawyers had “been subjected to a campaign of intimidation, harassment and illegal imprisonment by the US government, only for seeking to help these people... and for exposing the US administration’s actions.”

AI members distributed a petition to be presented to US ambassador Scott Brown calling for “an immediate investigation” into the conditions on the border detention facilities. Johnson also called for people to “write to your local MP because I think we need the New Zealand government to speak up publicly on this.”

Such appeals to the very government responsible for the crisis unfolding on the US border are futile. While Ardern has been glorified by the global media for supposedly showing “kindness” and “compassion” in her response to the Christchurch terrorist attack, her Labour Party-NZ First-Greens coalition government has in fact strengthened the military and intelligence alliance with US imperialism.

Gayaal Iddamalgoda, from the Migrant and Refugee Rights Campaign, added that “Australia, New Zealand’s ally, is committing the same atrocity against asylum seekers” as Trump. The Ardern government, he added, had set aside funds to stop asylum seeker boats from reaching New Zealand, something that has never happened.

Sarah Jane Teurakura Parton from Mums 4 Refugees described the Ardern government as “complicit” in attacks on asylum seekers. She noted that Labour MPs,

including Paul Eagle, Poto Williams, Louisa Wall and Jamie Strange, were photographed in the US embassy celebrating Independence Day with ambassador Brown, “while children are dying in concentration camps along the southern US border.” She explained that Brown, a Trump-appointee and former Republican senator, had campaigned throughout his political career against rights for undocumented migrants.

Parton noted that the Labour Party had “campaigned on an anti-immigration platform,” and scapegoated people with “Chinese sounding names” for the housing crisis prior to the 2017 election.

She tried, somewhat feebly, to defend the US Democratic Party, saying that although former president Obama’s anti-immigrant policies were “terrible,” his administration was “trying to make it better.” In reality, Obama deported more people than any previous president and the Democrats have supported the Trump administration by approving billions of dollars for the fascistic border agencies.

Socialist Equality Group members spoke with some of those in attendance, distributed the WSWS perspective “No to concentration camps in America!” and promoted the SEG’s July 14 rally to demand freedom for Assange and whistleblower Chelsea Manning.

Oliver, a gardener, said “children shouldn’t be held in horrendous conditions. Everyone deserves a fair shot at life and not to be kept in a bad situation with no way forward. I think Trump is a monster. He doesn’t have any social conscience.” He added that the Democrats were “not doing very much at all” to oppose Trump. He noted that there were “economic causes” for the refugee crisis, including US corporations “putting Third World farmers out of business” with unfair trading practices.

Olivia, a political science student, said that describing the immigrant detention facilities as concentration camps “isn’t hyperbole.” She noted that “the Holocaust did start with this sort of discrimination. We need to learn from history. Look at the systematic discrimination against Jewish people in Nazi Germany and Europe. They didn’t just wake up one day and find they were being all of a sudden murdered by the millions.”

Olivia said the Trump administration was seeking to “scapegoat” migrants for “economic inequality and

hardships in America, when it’s just the system and they really need to have a hard look at that inequality.”

Karen, whose family had immigrated to New Zealand from South Africa, was “disappointed and angry” that the Labour government and other parties had not criticised the US concentration camps. She agreed that the Christchurch terrorist had been “emboldened” by Trump, adding that Trump was “not just an overseas issue” but was setting “a precedent for people across the world to lean into fascism.”

Karen also believed nationalism and racism were being promoted to divert attention from “class and wealth disparity.” Poor people were being “manipulated into thinking that if you push down another group, you will be okay, that if other people suffer then you will have a better life.”

Jordan, who is self-employed, said the treatment of migrants by the US was “one step towards fascism. It’s very scary to put yourself in the shoes of a child that’s going through that. I think people like us, who are in more of a privileged position, should say something about it.”

Jordan also believed the current period was similar to the 1920s and 1930s, with rising interest in socialism among young people as well as the growth of the far right. “The gap between the rich and the poor is becoming larger and larger and the easiest thing to do is to point to a scapegoat,” he said. “Now it’s immigrants, before that it was Jews.”



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