

New Zealand: Maori nationalist parties exploit protest against property development

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In recent weeks the New Zealand media has given intense media coverage to an occupation led by Maori activists protesting against a proposed property development at a historic archaeological site on the Ihum?tao Peninsula in South Auckland.

More than 5,000 people joined a protest on July 28 against landowner Fletcher Building, one of the country's largest corporations, which wants to bulldoze the site to build 480 houses. Police had been preparing to evict the occupiers until Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern intervened on July 26, saying building would not begin until the dispute is resolved.

A tense standoff is continuing between protesters and police, while the Labour Party-led government negotiates behind closed doors with Fletcher and various Maori political and tribal leaders over the future of the site.

While it is legitimate to oppose the destruction of an important archeological site, the protest organisers have exploited the issue to promote Maori nationalism. This in turn has been taken up by the media right at the point when major struggles of workers and young people have erupted.

Following the Ardern government's formation in 2017, New Zealand workers joined the international upsurge of the working class, with nationwide strikes by teachers, nurses and doctors. The government is increasingly discredited for failing to address poverty and social inequality, record levels of homelessness and a crisis of unmet need in the health system.

Sections of the media and political establishment see the Ihum?tao protest as a means to corral social opposition behind the right-wing agenda of Maori nationalism, which has served for decades to divide workers based on race and nationality, and to subordinate Maori workers to the Maori bourgeoisie.

The protest has been transformed into something of a cause célèbre. The encampment has been visited by a host

of pro-business politicians, including leading members of the Green Party, part of the Labour-led government, the Mana Party and Maori Party.

The latter two Maori nationalist parties are seeking to use the protest to make a political comeback after failing to win a single seat in the 2017 election. Their program, based on demands for increased government payments to tribal capitalists, and discrimination against immigrants, is deeply unpopular in the Maori working class.

Ardern has also said she may visit Ihum?tao, having already sent leading Maori MPs from the Labour Party to speak with protest leader Pania Newton and her group Save Our Unique Landscape (SOUL).

SOUL, which has been occupying the site for more than three years, is calling on the government to buy the land off Fletcher and allow the tribe Te Kawerau a Maki to hold it "in trust for all New Zealanders to enjoy as a cultural heritage landscape." Alternatively, Newton has suggested that the land be publicly owned.

Ihum?tao is one of the first places in New Zealand settled and cultivated by Maori, who migrated from Polynesia during the 13th century. Maori were driven off the land in 1863, during the British army's ruthless war against those who refused to accept colonial rule. A farming family acquired the land and eventually sold it to Fletcher four years ago.

Archaeologist Dave Veart, who supports SOUL, told Radio NZ the proposed development is next to "one of the most complex archaeological landscapes in the country." He told TVNZ that Fletcher's plan was like building a housing complex next to England's Stonehenge.

There is widespread anger over Fletcher's undemocratic deal hatched with some tribal leaders from Te Kawerau a Maki to develop the site. The tribe gave its blessing for the development, worth hundreds of millions of dollars, after the Fletcher agreed to set aside 40 houses for tribal

members to purchase. Te Kawerau a Maki chairman Te Warena Taua said the deal was “unprecedented.”

Newton, who is Taua’s niece, denounced the agreement, saying the houses would be purchased by “millionaires” and the historic site would be compromised.

SOUL and Newton have been glorified in the media, including by the trade union-funded *Daily Blog* and pseudo-left groups, such as the International Socialist Organisation, Socialist Aotearoa and Organise Aotearoa. A *New Zealand Herald* commentator gushed that the protest “perfectly reflects heightened concerns and increased radicalism over racism, economic inequality” and “colonialism.”

SOUL’s perspective, however, is based on an alternative money-making scheme: its “Protect Ihum?tao” website proposes transforming the site into a “cultural, heritage and ecotourism location,” with “social enterprise, local employment and sustainability initiatives.”

Newton has praised, in particular, “the leadership of Tariana Turia,” a former Maori Party leader who called for Ardern’s government to buy the site off Fletcher. The Maori Party was part of the 2008–2017 conservative National Party’s coalition government, supporting its brutal austerity measures, including job cuts, an increase to the goods and services tax, and the privatisation of housing and power companies, in exchange for policies to benefit Maori businesses.

Mana leader Hone Harawira, according to some reports, is playing a major role in behind-the-scenes negotiations over Ihum?tao. Mana has been falsely promoted as “left wing” by the Unite union and the pseudo-lefts, on the basis of racial identity politics. In reality Harawira, who split from the Maori Party in 2010, is equally right-wing.

Harawira entered the Ihum?tao protest campsite on July 28 accompanying Brian and Hannah Tamaki, leaders of the fundamentalist Destiny Church. The Tamakis recently founded a far-right, anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant party, with support from Mana.

Matthew Tukaki from the Maori Council, a state-funded organisation representing tribal business interests, openly declared that the proposed housing development showed the need to slash immigration. He told TVNZ on July 29: “If we can’t afford to house current New Zealanders, if we can’t afford the current health system, if we can’t afford food for our children... why are we increasingly bringing even more people in?”

Tukaki has also pointed to one of the underlying mercenary aims of Maori nationalist leaders. Speaking on

Radio NZ on August 6, he warned of more protests and occupations, unless the law is changed so that privately-owned land can be acquired by the government and given to Maori tribes. The Treaty of Waitangi process currently only allows tribes to receive cash and publicly-owned assets from the government.

Since the 1990s successive Labour and National-led governments have doled out hundreds of millions of dollars in Treaty settlements, ostensibly as redress for the crimes of colonialism. These payments have been invested in lucrative businesses, including fisheries, forestry, property development and tourism.

As the Ihum?tao protest erupted, the Tainui tribe’s business arm announced plans to build a new \$150 million luxury hotel at Auckland Airport. Tainui currently controls \$1.06 billion in assets, built up from its original \$190 million 1995 Treaty settlement.

Treaty settlements have entrenched poverty and class oppression. Maori workers remain among the most exploited sections of the population, with twice the overall rate of unemployment, much higher rates of preventable disease, and lower life expectancy. Wealth inequality within the Maori population is twice as high as the general population.

Whatever the immediate outcome of negotiations over Ihum?tao, the WSWS warns that the working class can only defend its social and democratic rights—including the protection of historically significant sites from corporate profiteers—by fighting for public ownership and a workers’ government, in opposition to the Maori nationalists.

Workers must decisively reject this nationalist and race-based politics, which is promoted in one form or another by all the established parties to prevent the development of a conscious socialist movement uniting workers within New Zealand and internationally.

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