

New Zealand: Outrage over babies taken by the state

John Braddock, Tom Peters
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On July 30, several hundred people gathered outside parliament in Wellington for a protest titled “Hands Off Our Tamariki [children].” They delivered a petition with 17,000 signatures calling for the government to stop “stealing Maori children.” Green Party co-leader Marama Davidson, a partner in the ruling Labour-led coalition government of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, accepted the petition.

The protest’s immediate trigger was the attempted seizure in May of a child from the maternity ward at Hawke’s Bay Hospital, which was filmed on cellphones and exposed in an online documentary by *Newsroom* journalist Melanie Reid. The report highlighted the extraordinary power of Oranga Tamariki (OT), formerly Child, Youth and Family Services (CYFS), to forcibly take babies from parents who are overwhelmingly poor and powerless to defend themselves against the state apparatus.

Thousands of people were outraged by the video, which laid bare the workings of a system that traumatises some of the most vulnerable members of society. The government has promised numerous inquiries into the agency, which, like many previous inquiries, will do nothing to change its brutal function.

The midwives were locked out of the hospital leaving a distressed 19-year-old mother alone in a room overnight, while OT staff tried to pressure her to hand over her newborn child. Police officers were called to block the woman’s family from entering the hospital.

OT had been granted a custody order from the Family Court based on a social worker’s affidavit citing “lack of parenting skills,” domestic violence and the 17-year-old father’s use of marijuana. The mother’s family disputed these claims and filed for an urgent injunction against OT’s custody order, but this did not stop the attempted “uplift.”

Law professor Mark Henaghan told *Newsroom* he

doubted that OT’s custody order should have been granted by a court which heard only from a social worker. Midwife Jean Te Huia said the parents had no “opportunity to defend themselves against the allegations being made against them.” She said both parents were “kids” who were “victims of circumstance,” having grown up in homes with family violence. The mother had already had her previous child taken by OT, despite never having been accused of any crime.

In the end, with legal support and pressure from the *Newsroom* report, the mother was granted temporary custody of the child and was placed in an OT home for young mothers.

The events at Hawke’s Bay Hospital were not an aberration, but an example of what has become increasingly common. The Family Court grants 90 percent of Interim Custody Orders filed by OT. Three Maori babies a week are currently being taken. In 2017, 45 babies were taken the day they were born. Of 283 babies taken into care last year, more than 70 percent were from Maori or Pacific Island families, who together represent about 23 percent of the population.

Individual social workers are not to blame for the crisis they confront, which is the result of the drastic underfunding of the welfare system. However, under deepening austerity, state agencies such as OT operate as punitive institutions. There are hardly any programs to assist families affected by severe problems related to entrenched poverty, including alcoholism, drugs, gang-related crime and family dysfunction and violence.

In 2016, the National Party government boosted the child protection agency’s powers; it reduced parents’ rights by making them ineligible for legal aid, and established a system with no independent oversight. *Newsroom* reported “a sharp 33 percent increase in the removal of babies in the time period 2015–2018: a rate increase from 36 to 46 per 10,000 births.” The rate is

much higher for Maori: 102 per 10,000 births. Last year there were 6,300 children in state care—the highest number ever—two thirds of them Maori.

The Labour-led government claims that children are taken into care to protect them. However, once in state custody they are often abused and are more likely to end up on drugs, in prison, and to commit suicide. In 2018 alone, 220 children were physically or sexually abused while in OT's care. Data published in November 2016 revealed five children a year die in state care, and 550 had been abused in the previous five years, in one third of cases by their state-appointed caregivers.

Outrageously, Deputy Prime Minister and NZ First leader Winston Peters, who is Maori, sought to blame Maori people for the soaring child uplifts, saying there was “deep disquiet” about the “treatment of women and children in particular.”

In reality, Maori and Pacific Island families are disproportionately affected by child removals because they represent the most exploited section of the working class. It is overwhelmingly families in the poorest areas, such as Porirua and South Auckland, which are targeted.

The high levels of family distress, dysfunction and violence cannot be separated from the social crisis produced by decades of attacks on living standards. The previous National Party government slashed healthcare, education and other services and pushed thousands of single parents off welfare and into low-paid, insecure and part-time work. Labour has not reversed, but has deepened the austerity measures.

One in four children, and one third of Maori and Pacific Island children, live in poverty. The official unemployment rate is now 3.9 percent but much higher for Maori, at 7.7 percent. One in 100 people are homeless, and the rate for Maori is five times as high.

The situation is getting worse, despite the Ardern government's false promises to address poverty. Emergency hardship grants from the Ministry of Social Development, mostly for food, have nearly doubled since the government took office, from 267,244 in June 2017 to 487,539 in June 2019. The number of food parcels distributed by Auckland City Mission increased by an astonishing 44 percent in 2018–19.

The right-wing Maori Party, whose leaders spoke at the July 30 protest, sought to portray OT's brutal policies as simply the product of “racism.” Former Labour Party minister and Maori Party founder Tariana Turia said the main problem is “that the state thinks it's OK to place children outside of their genealogical links.” Party

president Che Weston called on the government “to stop wasting our taxes on state intervention” and fund non-government Maori service providers instead.

The Maori Party was part of the National-led government and supported its brutal austerity measures in exchange for policies to benefit the Maori elite, such as the Whanau Ora scheme, which allowed tribal-based corporations to profit from the privatisation of some welfare and healthcare services. The “Hands Off Our Tamariki” petition advocates a completely separate, parallel child welfare system for Maori, to be funded through Whanau Ora.

The further dismantling and privatisation of social services will only intensify the crisis facing families, regardless of the ethnicity of those running the services.

The working class must demand an end to the brutal seizure of children from their families. Billions of dollars must be redirected to properly fund public health and welfare services for families, and social programs to put an end to poverty, paid for by de-funding the military and massively increasing tax on the super-rich. This can only be achieved by fighting to abolish the profit system and reorganise society along socialist lines.

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