

New Zealand police introduce new armed units

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Late last month, the New Zealand Police launched Armed Response Teams (ARTs) in three districts: the Canterbury region including Christchurch; the Waikato; and Counties Manukau in working class South Auckland. Following a six-month trial, the ARTs will be “evaluated” before most likely being rolled out across the entire country—a major step towards arming all police officers.

The ARTs are the latest in a series of moves by the Labour Party-NZ First-Greens government to exploit the far-right terrorist attack in Christchurch in March to strengthen the state’s anti-democratic powers.

So-called “anti-terrorism” legislation introduced last month will allow courts to drastically restrict the freedom of individuals suspected, but not convicted, of involvement in overseas terrorist or “extremist” groups. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has also played a leading role advocating internet censorship in the name of combating “extremism.”

Now, the Ardern government is joining others internationally in militarising the police to defend ever-widening levels of social inequality against working class opposition. New Zealand’s ruling elite is undoubtedly watching the mass protests in Puerto Rico, Chile, Ecuador, Bolivia, Lebanon, Hong Kong and elsewhere with growing anxiety. The country has been shaken by nationwide strikes by teachers, nurses, doctors and other healthcare workers, opposing austerity and the decay of public services.

New Zealand is one of a small handful of countries where frontline police do not routinely carry guns, although patrol vehicles are equipped with them. In 2008, the previous Labour Party government armed police with tasers. An elite Armed Offenders Squad (AOS), with 352 members, was called out 1,058 times in 2017 to deal with allegedly armed suspects.

In response to widespread opposition to the ARTs, Ardern told TVNZ she was “totally opposed to the routine arming of the police.” She claimed the ARTs were “specialised” units that would be “called out” in cases where suspects were known to be armed.

This is thoroughly misleading. The ARTs, unlike the AOS, are deployed seven days a week to carry out standard tasks including so-called “preventive patrolling” in “high-risk areas.” Police Association president Chris Cahill told Radio NZ the ARTs would also be involved in “lower risk” activities, saying: “I don’t think anyone would expect that they should just sit around and do nothing all day.”

To justify the armed units, Police Commissioner Mike Bush said “our operating environment has changed” since fascist gunman Brenton Tarrant killed 51 people and injured 50 more in Christchurch using a military-style semi-automatic rifle. Ardern claimed that there was “a prevalence of guns in New Zealand” and police had to be better prepared for incidents involving firearms.

In fact, gun ownership has fallen considerably since the March 15 attack. The government banned possession of weapons like Tarrant’s and more than 36,000 guns have been turned in during a buyback.

There are many unanswered questions about why police did not prevent the Christchurch atrocity. Police issued Tarrant a firearms license, which required officers to visit his flat and take statements from referees. This was after Tarrant had made numerous threats against “communists” and immigrants on social media, including a death threat that was dismissed by Australian police. New Zealand police ignored a warning from a member of the Bruce Rifle Club, where Tarrant was a member, about violent and racist talk among club members.

Tarrant's fascist manifesto, which expressed sympathy for the police and military, was banned in an anti-democratic decision by New Zealand's censor. A royal commission of inquiry into how Tarrant's attack was planned and carried out is being held in secret.

The Christchurch attack is being used to make changes that have been planned for years. The Labour Party and its coalition partner NZ First ran a law-and-order campaign in the 2017 election, promising to increase police numbers by 1,800, or about 20 percent. Labour recruited former police union leader Greg O'Connor as a member of parliament. O'Connor had long advocated for police to be armed and has defended every shooting by police.

Shootings have already increased dramatically. In 2017, *Stuff* reported that 35 people were shot by police, 16 of them fatally, in the previous 10 years. This compared to 42 people shot in the 100 years prior to 2007. No officers have been charged, including in recent cases in 2015 and 2016 where witnesses described the shootings as unnecessary.

A petition against armed patrols on the ActionStation website gained more than 8,000 signatures in three weeks. One signatory, Tama'a, commented: "I don't want NZ to turn into America, where there's going to be higher chance of Maori/Pacific Islanders getting killed."

Sol Marco wrote: "Increased militarisation of the police and these patrols will only increase violence. The police are already biased against Maori, against poor people and against those who may have problems with mental illness... This is frightening."

About 60 people protested in Manukau Square on November 2 against the ARTs. Counties Manukau is one of the poorest areas of the country, with a large proportion of Maori and Pacific Islanders, who are disproportionately affected by police violence. From 2009 to 2019, 66 percent of those shot by police were Maori or Pacific, who make up just 22 percent of the population.

Mental Health Foundation chief executive Shaun Robinson told Radio NZ "more armed officers will result in more deaths and injuries for people experiencing mental health crises." He noted that the similar warnings when tasers were introduced were ignored and that weapons are used disproportionately against mentally ill people.

The ARTs will not be the last move to strengthen police powers. The Ardern government has proposed new "Firearms Prohibition Orders," which Police Minister Stuart Nash admitted would infringe on human rights. Anyone with a criminal conviction deemed "high risk" could be barred from "being around others who have firearms, using them under supervision, or being at a location that enables access to guns." To enforce the orders, police would get much greater powers to carry out warrantless searches.

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