

New Zealand: Christchurch terrorist pleads guilty

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31 March 2020

On March 25, as New Zealand prepared to enter a four-week lockdown to stop the spread of the deadly coronavirus, the fascist Brenton Tarrant pleaded guilty to charges of terrorism over the murder of 51 people and injury of 49 at two mosques in Christchurch on March 15, 2019.

The attack, which the gunman broadcast live on the internet, was the country's worst-ever mass shooting and shocked the world with its brutality. It helped to inspire similar vicious attacks against Muslims, Jews and immigrants in the US and Germany over the past year.

The guilty plea reportedly surprised the local media, given Tarrant had previously entered a plea of not guilty and was expected to use his trial, scheduled for June, to espouse his racist and fascist ideas.

Judge Cameron Mander stated in court "the entry of guilty pleas represents a very significant step towards bringing finality to this criminal proceeding." Sentencing will take place later this year at a date yet to be announced.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern told the media: "These guilty pleas and conviction bring accountability for what happened and also save the families who lost loved ones, those who were injured, and other witnesses, the ordeal of a trial."

Among survivors and relatives of the victims, however, there are mixed feelings. Tony Green, a spokesperson from the Al Noor mosque, told Radio NZ "nobody was looking forward to this trial, so the shadow has moved on. But an awful lot of questions remain... What exactly happened?... How was it even allowed to happen?"

Abdul Aziz, who tried to physically stop the shooter during the massacre, said some families were relieved, but he had wanted the trial to proceed because of "all

those questions I had in my mind, but now we cannot have all those answers." He told the *New Zealand Herald* the families didn't know about the hearing where Tarrant entered his plea: "We should be notified if something like this is happening... I would have liked to be there, but we weren't told."

Momina Cole, whose brother Ashraf Ali died, told the *Northern Advocate*: "We and the rest of the grieving families, I am sure, would have ensured that when he went on trial, we'd have asked him why he killed so many people... That may never come out now that he's pleaded guilty, which came as a surprise."

Whatever the motivation for Tarrant's change of plea, it has conveniently served to further suppress public discussion about the causes of the atrocity. Ardern had previously urged the media not to report on Tarrant's statements about his fascist views during the trial, which the major media outlets agreed not to do.

New Zealand's Chief Censor banned Tarrant's manifesto, preventing discussion of its praise for US President Donald Trump and for the armed forces, and the similarity of Tarrant's racist and anti-immigrant views, and his hostility to socialism, to those held in the political establishment.

New Zealand First, which plays a major role in Ardern's Labour Party-led coalition government, is an anti-immigrant party that has demonised Muslims, Chinese and Indian people. In the lead-up to the March 15 anniversary of the Christchurch attack, cabinet minister Shane Jones, from NZ First, railed against Indian immigrants and students in terms similar to those used by Tarrant.

Tarrant's guilty plea means he cannot be questioned in court about how he planned his massacre, whether he had accomplices, the extent of his ties with fascist groups in Australia, Europe and New Zealand, and

whether he received any assistance from state officials.

In his manifesto, Tarrant stated that many European fascists are members of the military. In recent months it has emerged that at least two New Zealand soldiers are members of the fascist Action Zealandia, whose racist theories closely resemble Tarrant's. One member, who was questioned immediately after the Christchurch terrorist attack, has been charged with leaking sensitive military information. No further information about the case has been made public.

A royal commission of inquiry into the terror attack, due to report its findings at the end of April, has heard all its evidence in secret hearings, so that the public cannot know what the police and intelligence agencies in New Zealand and Australia might have known about Tarrant. Whatever is contained in the final report, the entire process has been designed so that no state officials in either country can be held accountable.

The Islamic Women's Council released its submission to the inquiry to Radio NZ. It constitutes a scathing indictment of the public service, under successive National Party and Labour Party governments, which failed to act on warnings of racist and neo-Nazi threats against the Muslim community. The council noted that no one has been held accountable for these failures, which paved the way for the terrorist attack.

No explanation has been given for how Tarrant was able to move to New Zealand, obtain a firearms license and spend two years preparing for his attack. Police have not explained why they failed to act on warnings about racist discussions involving violent threats being held at the Bruce Rifle Club, where Tarrant was a member.

Australian police have also given no explanation for their refusal to act after receiving a report in 2016 of a death threat made by Tarrant against an anti-fascist individual on Facebook.

The danger of the extreme right has not diminished in the year since the Christchurch attack. While fascist tendencies have no popular support, they are being protected by the state and emboldened by the rightward lurch in governments and parliaments in the US, Brazil, Germany, Hungary, Australia and many other countries, including New Zealand.

Masses of workers and young people are sympathetic to socialism and are entering into struggles against the

criminal austerity policies that have led to countless deaths from COVID-19. As a global economic crisis unfolds comparable in scale to the Great Depression of the 1930s, the ruling elites will seek to use fascist movements as a weapon to defend capitalism against the working class.



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