

Media glorifies New Zealand government's pro-business response to the pandemic

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The corporate media internationally has hailed the response of the Labour Party-led government in New Zealand to the COVID-19 pandemic. A *Washington Post* article on April 7 declared that the country “isn’t just flattening the curve” of infections, “it’s squashing it.” Similar reports have appeared in CNN, the UK *Guardian*, and many other outlets, presenting New Zealand as an example for other countries.

In the April 12 *Independent*, Alastair Campbell, former communications director for UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, described New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern as “one of, if not the, standout leaders of this crisis,” showing “natural empathy” in her calls for people to “be kind” to each other. He pointed to New Zealand’s relatively low number of deaths and “just over a thousand” confirmed cases of COVID-19.

The praise for New Zealand from these quarters—including the *Washington Post*, owned by Amazon’s Jeff Bezos, and Campbell, one of the UK’s most prominent war propagandists—should give pause to those who have been led to believe the Ardern government is leading a progressive, “empathetic” response to the pandemic.

The priority of governments, in New Zealand and internationally, has been to prop up the wealth of the super-rich and big businesses, with trillions of dollars in corporate bailouts worldwide. Since these vast sums must ultimately be paid through the intensified exploitation of the working class, there is now a growing campaign to force people back to work before their safety can be guaranteed.

The Ardern government’s lockdown was praised by CNN for being “short, sharp and brutal,” implying it could enable a quick return to work, something that sections of the NZ media and businesses are demanding. Although the government says its four-week lockdown, which began on March 26, might be extended, Education Minister Chris Hipkins has indicated schools could reopen as soon as April 29.

There is not enough data to show how close New Zealand is to “squashing” the curve, or stopping the spread of the

coronavirus in the community. As of today, there have been 1,366 known cases, 9 deaths, and 15 people are in hospital.

The *Washington Post* asserted that “there is little evidence of community transmission” in New Zealand. However, according to the Ministry of Health, only 39 percent of cases are linked to overseas travel. Just 2 percent are labelled as “community transmission,” but this only refers to cases with no known source; 48 percent of cases are classed as “contacts of existing cases,” and 11 percent are “under investigation.”

NZ’s relatively small number of deaths is mainly because most cases are among younger people. However, Director-General of Health Dr Ashley Bloomfield has warned that more elderly people could die, with several of the deaths associated with the Rosewood aged care facility in Christchurch. The government has rejected calls from rest homes for all staff and new admissions to be tested.

The total number of tests undertaken is 64,399, in a population of five million. While this is higher, per capita, than many European countries and the US, no country is doing enough testing to be certain how far the virus has spread. Many COVID-19 cases do not display symptoms, and people without symptoms are not being tested.

The delay in closing schools, and restrictions on testing, led to at least one major outbreak centred around Auckland’s Marist College.

Unlike most countries, New Zealand was locked down before anyone had died from COVID-19, following a push for action from thousands of healthcare workers, teachers and others. However, while schools and most businesses are now closed, hundreds of thousands of people continue to work and many are at risk. Transport, healthcare, food production and other industries have been deemed “essential.”

Thousands of workers in meat processing factories, notorious for unsafe conditions and frequent injuries, demanded a shutdown of the industry due to the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) and social distancing measures. The Meat Workers Union is playing a key role in

working with employers to keep factories running.

Supermarket workers have also spoken out in the media over the lack of PPE and pressure to remain at work despite pre-existing health problems. Workers at supermarkets in Kaikohe and Hawke's Bay have tested positive for the virus.

While the government claims that healthcare workers have access to appropriate PPE, there are many reports of shortages and restrictions. Two nurses who tested positive for COVID-19 told the *New Zealand Herald* they were instructed by Waikato Hospital management to remove protective masks and gowns when dealing with a patient who had symptoms of COVID-19. Without adequate protections, hospitals could become centres for transmission of the disease, as has happened in other countries.

The healthcare system has been starved of resources for decades. In 2018, the Ardern government told striking healthcare workers there was "no money" to meet their demands for safe levels of staffing. In an uncontrolled outbreak, hospitals would be quickly overwhelmed, potentially causing tens of thousands of deaths.

The media's emphasis on Ardern's supposed "kindness" and compassion promotes the fiction that the entire population is "in this together." This message is being echoed by the trade unions, even as they suppress resistance to wage cuts and layoffs.

Council of Trade Unions president Richard Wagstaff told *Newsroom* on April 12 that the unions enjoyed a "positive tripartite relationship" with businesses and the government and were acting "as an enforcement agency" for the government's "wage subsidy" scheme. The scheme has handed out billions of dollars to businesses affected by the pandemic, while allowing them to slash wages by 20 percent or more.

The nationalist *Daily Blog*, funded by three trade unions, has been effusive in its praise for the government. Editor Martyn Bradbury declared on April 6 that Ardern "deserves double her pay for the incredible leadership she has shown during this event."

The pseudo-left International Socialist Organisation, which supports the Labour government, said on March 22 that the pro-business \$12.1 billion bailout package was "commendable in its Keynesian approach" and it hoped for "much more progressive and bold" policies in future. On March 25, the group published another article praising Ardern's "social-democratic" response to the pandemic in contrast with "neoliberal" governments around the world.

In fact, while working people remain most at risk of catching the virus, they are also being made to pay for the economic crisis triggered by the pandemic, which Auckland Mayor Phil Goff described as the worst since the Great Depression.

Finance Minister Grant Robertson has admitted that "generations" of workers will repay the debt from the government's business subsidies and tax cuts. Green Party co-leader James Shaw, who is part of the government, told TVNZ on April 12: "Our children and possibly our grandchildren are going to be paying back the debt that we're currently racking up to get through this crisis for many, many decades."

Of course, as everyone knows, the children of the super-rich will continue to prosper. In addition to the bailout, the Reserve Bank will spend up to \$33 billion on quantitative easing operations, aimed at pouring cash into the financial markets.

The financial elites do not have to work and can self-isolate in style. New Zealand real estate agents have reported an upswing in enquiries from billionaires around the world looking for luxury "bolt-holes" to "ride out" the pandemic.

Meanwhile, the government says unemployment will reach "double digits," while some economists say it could rise to 30 percent. Already tens of thousands more people are being forced to rely on charity; demand for Wellington City Mission's food parcels has increased by 400 percent, and other cities have reported similar increases.

Working people must reject the lie that the New Zealand Labour Party-led government represents a "kinder" or more egalitarian response to the pandemic. In opposition to Labour and the unions, and their pseudo-left cheerleaders, the Socialist Equality Group (NZ) urges workers to take up the fight for a genuine, revolutionary socialist response to the crisis. The banks and big businesses must be expropriated, with tens of billions of dollars redirected to the public healthcare system and to meet the urgent needs of the population for decent jobs and living standards.



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