

Media glorify New Zealand Prime Minister as she ignores scientific advice to continue pandemic lockdown

Tom Peters
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The following speech was delivered by Tom Peters to the 2020 International May Day Online Rally held by the World Socialist Web Site and the International Committee of the Fourth International on May 2. Peters is a leading member of the Socialist Equality Group in New Zealand.

The corporate media is glorifying New Zealand as an example of a supposedly humane response to the pandemic, in contrast to the Trump administration and governments in Britain, Brazil and elsewhere.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern was recently hailed in *The Atlantic* as “the most effective leader on the planet.” The *Financial Times* published a column with the headline, “Arise, Saint Jacinda, a leader for our troubled times.” According to the *New York Times*, Australia and New Zealand are “restoring trust in democracy” with their strategy to combat the virus.

Numerous articles assert that Ardern is naturally more “empathetic” because she is a woman, and that the world can be saved if only more female leaders are elected.

No one should be fooled by this propaganda campaign. New Zealand has 1,479 confirmed and probable cases of COVID-19 and 19 deaths. While this is fewer than in many other countries, the virus has not been eliminated and new cases are reported every day.

This past Tuesday, the government relaxed its lockdown measures, allowing schools and many businesses to reopen, more than a week earlier than scientists had advised. The move was opposed in a petition by nearly 45,000 teachers, parents and childcare workers.

Ardern said extending the lockdown might help eliminate the virus, but such considerations had to be

“traded against the huge economic impact,” meaning the impact on corporate profits. The decision will be used as an example in other countries, whose leaders are clamouring for a return to work, whatever the cost to people’s health and lives.

New Zealand’s public health system has been starved of funding for decades, and was totally unprepared for a pandemic. In 2018, following a nationwide strike by nurses and healthcare workers, Ardern insisted that there was no money to fix the crisis in hospitals. The union bureaucracy pushed through a sellout deal that maintained the unsafe levels of staffing.

Preventable diseases are widespread, particularly among working class, Maori and Pacific Island communities. Last year, the government failed to stop a devastating measles outbreak, which spread to Samoa, an impoverished Pacific country and a former colony of New Zealand, where it killed 83 people.

While refusing to properly fund the health system, the government has responded to the pandemic by handing out more than \$12 billion in business subsidies, bailouts and tax cuts. The Reserve Bank has promised billions more for quantitative easing to prop up the financial system.

Finance Minister Grant Robertson says that the debt being accumulated by the state will be paid back by “generations” of New Zealanders. Of course, he does not mean the super-rich, whose fortunes will continue to expand.

The government and big business have begun a sweeping assault on jobs and wages to ramp up the exploitation of the working class. Economists predict unemployment will exceed 10 percent, and perhaps reach 30 percent, a level unseen since the Great

Depression.

Tens of thousands of people have been sacked since the start of the year. The tourism industry, which employs one in eight workers, has collapsed. Major companies have slashed wages by 20 percent or more and universities are threatening to do the same.

In a country of five million people, more than 600,000 live in poverty and the number is increasing rapidly. One charity estimates that the number of people who can't afford enough food has doubled since the start of the year, from 10 to 20 percent of the population. Food banks are reporting a massive 400 percent increase in demand.

The Ardern government, a coalition between Labour, the Greens and the anti-immigrant New Zealand First Party, has no solution except mass unemployment, poverty, nationalism and militarism—including a stronger alliance with US imperialism.

One year after a fascist terrorist killed 51 people at two Christchurch mosques, government ministers continue to scapegoat foreigners for social problems, fostering the growth of the extreme right.

As in the 1930s, however, the social disaster is destroying illusions in capitalism and pushing millions of people to the left. The critical task is to build the necessary socialist leadership for the revolutionary struggles ahead.

In New Zealand, this requires a complete political break from the Labour Party, the Greens, as well as the unions and middle class, pseudo-left groups that support the government and are joining the glorification of Jacinda Ardern.

The International Socialist Organisation, for example, says Ardern is an “excellent political figure” and the praise she has received is “well-deserved.” The liberal *Daily Blog*, which is supported by Unite and other unions, has proposed doubling the Prime Minister's salary. The blog is also demanding cuts to immigration, a larger military, and regurgitates the US propaganda blaming China for the pandemic.

The Socialist Equality Group, the New Zealand supporters of the ICFI, is the only tendency that opposes the Ardern government from the standpoint of socialism. We reject all forms of nationalism and identity politics, which seek to divide the working class according to race or gender.

The only solution to the present crisis is the fight to

unify working people in New Zealand—including Maori, Europeans, Pacific and Asian immigrants—with workers internationally, to abolish the profit system. We call on you to join us in this historic struggle.



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