

New Zealand sees increase in racist anti-Chinese attacks

Tom Peters
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New Zealand has seen an increase in racist attacks against Asian and Chinese people. *Stuff* reported on May 4 that in just five weeks the Human Rights Commission had received 86 reports of race-related incidents linked to the coronavirus pandemic.

Race Relations Commissioner Meng Foon said the incidents “primarily related to anti-Chinese racism and harassment, or to events affecting other people of Asian descent who believe they were mistaken for being Chinese.” About 30 percent of cases were directed against Chinese people, 28 percent against Muslims, 14 percent Indians and 5 percent targeted Maori and Pacific Islanders. For every documented incident there are undoubtedly many that go unreported.

In the most shocking attack, 60-year-old photographer Sammy Zhu, who works for the Chinese language newspaper the *New Zealand Messenger*, was punched in the face in Christchurch on April 28, leaving him badly bruised and covered in blood. A 34-year-old man was arrested a few days later and charged with assault.

Another elderly East Asian man was assaulted on April 29 in a park in Lynfield, Auckland. Chinese news agency Xinhua reported that “police have caught the attacker but the victim left the scene.”

In another example, parents removed their child from a Whangarei school after she was subjected to repeated racist abuse. Asian university students have also been targeted with taunts that they brought the “Chinese virus” to New Zealand.

Netsafe, which monitors racism and hate speech online, told the media it had a 63 percent increase in reports between January 1 and April 12, compared to the previous six months.

On May 5, employment lawyer Mai Chen told Radio NZ people were being sacked because of their ethnicity

during the pandemic. “I am seeing employers who seem to be taking this opportunity to make redundant those whose face doesn’t fit or who may not be most like us,” she said.

A similar rise in anti-Asian xenophobia and racism has been reported in the US, Australia and internationally. One Radio NZ commentator noted that racists represent a small minority of the population that has been emboldened by US President Donald Trump, who repeatedly refers to COVID-19 as a “Chinese virus.”

The Trump administration is spreading the lie that China deliberately unleashed the virus from a laboratory in Wuhan. On May 6, Trump escalated the propaganda war against China by describing the pandemic as the “worst attack” in US history, “worse than Pearl Harbor” and 9/11.

The aim of such statements is to create a wartime atmosphere to justify threats and retaliation against China, while diverting anger from the US government, whose willful negligence has caused tens of thousands of deaths.

The anti-China hysteria, however, is not confined to the White House; it has been echoed in the New Zealand media. On April 21, for example, Radio NZ aired a 20-minute interview with Jamie Metzl, a former US State Department official under President Bill Clinton, who declared it was pretty likely the virus was unintentionally leaked from a laboratory in Wuhan. Despite scientists overwhelmingly rejecting such claims, Metzl was not seriously challenged by the interviewer.

The trade union-backed *Daily Blog* has peddled the same lies. On May 4, editor Martyn Bradbury referred to “the growing suspicion that the Chinese may have accidentally released the virus themselves from their

Wuhan Lab.”

Bradbury sneeringly dismissed claims that such US-sponsored conspiracy theories were stoking xenophobia. He concluded his article by stating that “if China has had a hand in accidentally starting this pandemic, war might follow plague.”

The Labour Party-led government of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, falsely glorified as “kind” and “compassionate” by the media, is actively discriminating against immigrants, who are largely from Asia. Temporary migrant workers who have lost their jobs due to the impact of the pandemic have been denied unemployment benefits and forced to rely on emergency relief from charities and the Civil Defence agency.

The government last year introduced class-based immigration restrictions, making it harder for migrants to bring family members to New Zealand. The right-wing nationalist NZ First Party, which has a major role in the coalition government, is demanding more attacks. Earlier this year, as the country prepared to mark the anniversary of the Christchurch fascist terrorist attack, NZ First’s Shane Jones, a cabinet minister, made vile denunciations of Indian immigrants.

The Ardern government is also continuing to strengthen NZ’s military and intelligence alliance with US imperialism at the same time as Washington threatens China, Iran, Venezuela and other countries.

Wellington has joined a new US-led network aimed at reducing economic reliance on China. No details have been made public, but US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on April 29 that the so-called “Economic Prosperity Network” would include Australia, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea and Vietnam.

Speaking to *Newshub* on May 2, Foreign Minister Winston Peters, leader of NZ First, denounced previous governments for making “a terrible mistake of putting all their eggs in one basket” by turning China into New Zealand’s biggest trading partner. In April, 30 percent of NZ’s exports went to China.

Peters’ comments were echoed by the pro-US, NATO-funded academic Anne-Marie Brady, who told *Newshub* that New Zealand should “form a strategic alliance” with Taiwan and other “like-minded states,” while reducing reliance on China.

On May 7, in a move calculated to stoke tensions

with Beijing, Peters announced that New Zealand will co-sign a letter by the United States calling for Taiwan to rejoin the World Health Organisation.

The Chinese Embassy issued a statement objecting to the decision, saying New Zealand’s relationship with China was based on adherence to the “one-China principle.” Beijing regards Taiwan as a province of China and therefore ineligible for membership of the WHO.

Some pro-business commentators are worried about the ever-more open alignment against China. *Newstalk ZB*’s Heather du Plessis Allan declared that Peters was playing a “dangerous game when we arguably need [China] now more than ever,” given the rapidly worsening economic crisis.

Every establishment party, however—Labour, NZ First, the Greens and the opposition National Party—supports New Zealand’s alliance with US imperialism. As the country approaches an election in September, the political and media establishment will continue to stoke xenophobia in an attempt to divert anger over the worsening social disaster, including sharply increased unemployment, triggered by the pandemic.



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