New Zealand government stokes tensions with China

Tom Peters
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New Zealand's Labour Party-led government is escalating tensions with China, the country's main trading partner. In an inflammatory statement, Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters alleged that China tried to dissuade New Zealand from going into lockdown to stop the spread of COVID-19.

The government has also backed US and Australian demands for an "investigation" into the origins of COVID-19 in China, and has called for Taiwan to be given observer status at the World Health Organisation.

The Trump administration is leading the drive to scapegoat China for the pandemic in order to divert attention from its own criminal negligence, which has led to nearly 100,000 deaths. The death toll is set to soar in the US and internationally as governments move to reopen businesses before it is safe to do so.

The US ruling elite is also using the pandemic to escalate its trade war and demonisation of China in preparation for military conflict. Trump has described the pandemic as an act of war "worse than Pearl Harbor" and threatened to cut all ties with China. US imperialism views Beijing as the main obstacle to its global dominance.

New Zealand, a de facto US ally and member of the US-led Five Eyes intelligence network, is integrated into the anti-China build-up. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's government has called for a greater US military presence in the Pacific region to counter China. In 2018, her government joined the Pentagon in labelling Russia and China the greatest "threats" to global stability.

Deputy Prime Minister Peters, who leads the right-wing nationalist NZ First Party, is playing a key role in stoking anti-Chinese sentiment. On May 14, he told *Stuff* that the Chinese government "didn't want us to go into lockdown" in late March and "thought it was an overreaction." Peters said he had replied to Beijing: "We've got to protect our own people, and as fast as we can."

The Chinese embassy issued a statement denying Peters' allegation. It said China "has never dissuaded New Zealand from going into lockdown… We hope that certain people in New Zealand will stop spreading disinformation and creating trouble and work to enhance instead of undermining bilateral mutual trust and cooperation."

In another statement on May 21, published on the *Politik* blog, Chinese ambassador Wu Xi warned that China-New Zealand relations were "at a crossroads." Wu said "certain countries continue to use the pandemic to stigmatize China and scapegoating, creating all kinds of lies." She urged the New Zealand government to "oppose politicizing the pandemic."

These statements have prompted nervous responses from some commentators. *New Zealand Herald* columnist Matthew Hooton called for Ardern to "sack" Peters if he makes "one more gratuitous insult against China." As the country enters an economic and social crisis worse than anything since the 1930s, sections of the business elite are clearly concerned about deteriorating relations with China.

Attempting to contain the diplomatic fallout, Ardern told *Newshub* on May 18 that New Zealand had joined the Australian-led call for an investigation into the pandemic as a "pragmatic" step to "learn" about the virus. She declared: "We're not interested in blame, we're not interested in any kind of witch-hunt."

Speaking to TVNZ, Finance Minister Grant Robertson said despite the "difference of opinion between ourselves and China" over Taiwan's status at the WHO, "the relationship is fundamentally sound."

Ardern and Robertson, however, have not denounced

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Peters' statements. Labour has no real disagreements with NZ First. After the 2017 election, Ardern gave considerable power to NZ First, including the positions of foreign minister, defence minister and deputy prime minister, despite the party receiving only 7 percent of the votes.

As the economic crisis continues to worsen, Labour and NZ First will resort to more xenophobic and anti-immigrant policies to divide the working class, as they have done for years. Workers and young people must oppose these poisonous politics, which have led to racist attacks on Chinese immigrants and other people of Asian appearance.

The government has refused to extend welfare benefits to temporary migrant workers, including many from China and other parts of Asia who have lost their jobs due to the lockdown and the economic collapse. On May 12, Peters declared that jobless migrants "should go home" and said that the government would consider paying their airfares, as this would be cheaper than "having them here year after year."

Evidently emboldened by Peters' statements, vandals spray-painted the Chinese consulate in Auckland on May 18 with the words: "F*** the CCP" and "Taiwan #1." According to *Taiwan News*, a Twitter user who uploaded a video of the graffiti called for countries to confront China militarily.

Earlier this year, fascists vandalised the Auckland office of Chinese-born National Party MP Jian Yang. Peters and supporters of the government such as the *Daily Blog* have labelled Yang, without any evidence, as a Chinese Communist Party agent.

The trade union-backed *Daily Blog* published an article on May 19 by NZ First member Curwen Rolinson, who declared that Peters was "standing up for New Zealand's interests and independence." He accused China of "buying up our politicians and newspaper columnists," the same rhetoric used by the fascists.

The blog has published anti-Chinese rants, echoing false claims by US intelligence agencies that Beijing "lied" to cover up the spread of the virus in January, and that the virus originated in a laboratory in Wuhan.

Pro-US academics, meanwhile, are urging the government to reduce its economic ties with China. The NATO-funded Small States and the New Security Environment (SSANSE) initiative, led by University of Canterbury academic Anne-Marie Brady, published a policy advice document on May 10 calling for the government to decrease New Zealand's "trade dependency" on China.

The paper, written by public relations consultant and former diplomat Charles Finny and published on the *Spinoff*, declared that China had "a propensity to use trade dependency as a political lever," without elaborating. Finny was named in US embassy cables published by WikiLeaks in 2010 as a "close contact" of the American embassy, prompting him to tell *Stuff* that he was "not a spy" for the US.

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