

Protests across New Zealand over US police murder of George Floyd

Tom Peters
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Tens of thousands of people joined protests and vigils in New Zealand yesterday in solidarity with the mass movement that has erupted in the United States following the brutal murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers.

Media reported that at least 4,000 people gathered in Auckland's Aotea Square and marched to the US consulate. Photographs and videos shared on social media appear to show far larger crowds, with some estimating the number to be in the tens of thousands.

In Wellington, at least 2,000 people held a vigil outside parliament and hundreds marched to the US embassy. About 500 joined a protest in Christchurch and hundreds more in Dunedin.

The rallies were part of a powerful wave of international protests. About 2,000 people gathered in Perth, and rallies are scheduled for other Australian cities over the coming days. Protests have been held across Europe, Canada and in Japan, among other places.

The international movement reflects the intense opposition that has built up in the working class, over decades, not only against police brutality but also never-ending war and unprecedented levels of social inequality. The failure of governments to stop hundreds of thousands of deaths from COVID-19, and the destruction of tens of millions of jobs, has further fuelled the outrage.

The New Zealand crowds were largely made up of young workers and students, of all ethnicities including white people, Maori, Pacific Islanders and immigrants from many nationalities. Marchers chanted “Black lives matter” and “I can’t breathe”—the last words of George Floyd as he was choked to death by police officer Derek Chauvin.

One of the organisers in Wellington, Nicole Inskeep,

who moved to New Zealand from Charlottesville, Virginia—the scene of a white supremacist rampage that killed one person in 2017—read from a list of names of black men and women killed by police in the US.

In Auckland, Nigerian-born mixed martial artist Israel Adesanya was among those who addressed the crowd. He thanked people “of all different races for being here, ‘cause we need you to speak up” against racism.

Also attending the Auckland protest was Randy Pollard, who migrated from Minneapolis where he was friends with George Floyd. He told the *New Zealand Herald*: “He was genuine, kind-hearted... just a wonderful guy. He was very approachable and easy-going. I had a lot of respect for him.”

Pollard said there would be no peace until all the officers involved in the killing were brought to justice. He added: “At the same time, the president is saying, if people resist, shoot. That’s ridiculous. How can you have peace if that is coming from the president?”

Many protesters also denounced the further militarisation of the New Zealand Police by the Labour Party-NZ First-Greens coalition government.

There is widespread public opposition to Police Armed Response Teams (ARTs), with thousands of people tweeting the hashtag #ArmsDownNZ in recent days. Many tweets said they did not want New Zealand to become like the US.

In recent years there has been an increase in the number of killings by NZ Police, with the victims disproportionately working class, Maori, and mentally ill people.

The police, backed by the Ardern government, used the Christchurch massacre of 51 Muslims by a fascist gunman last year as a pretext to test the ARTs in three working class areas: Christchurch, Waikato and South Auckland. The armed units could soon be made

permanent and expanded.

While Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern claims that she does not want police to be routinely armed, the ARTs have been deployed hundreds of times for routine policing throughout the six-month trial period.

Responding to yesterday's protests, Ardern told TVNZ this morning, "I understand the strength of feeling," stating she was "horrified" by the killing of Floyd. At the same time, however, she said the protests were "a clear breach" of COVID-19 restrictions on public gatherings. Asked whether police should have intervened to stop the rallies, Ardern said "those decisions are for the police."

Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters, who leads the right-wing nationalist New Zealand First Party, went even further, asking on Newstalk ZB: "Why aren't we prosecuting those people who organised those protests?"

Seconds later, Peters called for the immediate lifting of the country's social distancing restrictions—something demanded by big business but opposed by leading health experts, who warned that this would risk a resurgence of the coronavirus. Ardern has indicated that remaining restrictions could be lifted as early as next week.

Far-right ACT Party leader David Seymour—who fraudulently poses as a defender of free speech, similarly denounced the protests as a "slap in the face for every business that has restricted its operations."

Yesterday, Green Party co-leader Marama Davidson declared that her party stood "in solidarity" with Floyd's family and other victims of US police killings, and against the "culture of systemic racism and violence... built on centuries of injustices and social inequities."

The party's justice spokesperson Golriz Ghahraman also stated that they oppose the Police ARTs in New Zealand and would push "to demilitarise our police force from within government."

These statements are thoroughly hypocritical. The Greens are a crucial part of the government, which was formed with a platform of further militarising the police. The 2017 coalition agreement between Labour and NZ First promised to recruit an extra 1,800 front-line police officers, an increase of about 20 percent. The number of police training programs in schools has also been expanded.

The government has used the COVID-19 pandemic to give the police much greater powers to make arrests and carry out warrantless searches. Emergency laws also allow the military to be deployed to assist police.

As New Zealand enters into the worst economic and social crisis since the 1930s, the police will inevitably be deployed more and more openly against the working class, to suppress opposition to inequality and militarism.

Ardern, who is hailed in the media internationally for her supposed "kindness" and leadership, has not denounced Trump's threat to deploy the military against protesters. Labour, NZ First and the Greens, along with the opposition parties, are all committed to the alliance with US imperialism, along with a vast increase in military spending, to integrate New Zealand into US war plans.



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