

New Zealand Police ends armed units after widespread opposition

Tom Peters
12 June 2020

On June 9, New Zealand Police Commissioner Andrew Coster announced that Armed Response Teams (ARTs) would not be made permanent, following a six-month trial that ended in April.

Coster's announcement follows protests by thousands of people on June 1 in all major New Zealand cities as part of the global demonstrations over the US police murder of George Floyd. Opposition to the ARTs was a significant factor fuelling the local events.

Police also received thousands of emails opposing the ARTs and tens of thousands of people expressed their opposition on social media.

The decision represents a temporary retreat by the police, which has long been seeking to equip all frontline officers with guns. Efforts to militarise the police will continue as the ruling elite, like its counterparts internationally, prepares to confront growing opposition to social inequality and war.

New Zealand is one of a handful of countries where officers do not carry guns by default, although they are in police vehicles, and officers frequently carry tasers (introduced by the previous Labour Party government in 2008). There is also a heavily-armed Police Armed Offenders Squad, which is regularly called out.

The Labour Party-led government exploited the March 15, 2019 Christchurch massacre as a pretext to test the ARTs in three working-class areas: Christchurch, Waikato and Counties Manukau in South Auckland. Then-Police Commissioner Mike Bush declared that “the operating environment has changed, particularly since March 15.”

Armed police would not have prevented the terrorist attack, in which fascist gunman Brenton Tarrant killed 51 people and wounded 49. In fact, Tarrant was able to carry out his atrocity because police in Australia and New Zealand ignored multiple warnings about neo-

Nazi threats against Muslims, and dismissed reports about the danger posed by Tarrant.

When the ART trial began, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said it did not constitute “routine” arming, something she “totally opposed.” She claimed the ARTs were “specialised” units for dealing with armed offenders.

These assurances were completely hollow. In the first five weeks of the trial, according to Radio NZ, the new teams were deployed 75 times a day— more deployments per week than the Armed Offenders Squads had in an entire year.

Newshub reported on May 30 that during the first three months the ARTs “were used 339 times for bail checks, 224 times for basic enquiries, 223 times for suspicious activity and 43 times for burglar alarms.” The armed officers were used 1,406 times for traffic stops.

Armed incidents made up less than 3 percent of those attended by armed officers.

These figures represent only a fraction of the incidents attended by the ARTs. Radio NZ reported on June 5 that during the first two months data was collected for just 17 percent of callouts. An internal police document from December 2019 referred to “a general under-reporting of deployment activity and selective reporting practices across each district.”

Auckland University statistician Thomas Lumley commented that selective reporting “completely undermines” the trial. Officers may have filled out paperwork only for incidents “where they felt that having armed police there was helpful.”

The trial followed a sharp increase in police violence. From 2007 to 2017, police shot 35 people, more than in the previous 40 years. In the seven months from December 2019 to May 2020, cops have shot four

people dead.

Of those shot in the past 10 years (fatal and non-fatal), two thirds were Maori or Pacific Islanders. These groups, which make up about 24 percent of the population, are over-represented in the poor and the working-class suburbs where police resources are concentrated.

A survey of 1,155 Maori and Pacific people by ActionStation, published in April, found that 85 percent opposed the ART trial and 78 percent had “experienced or witnessed police acting with bias or racism.”

Opposition was also expressed in support for the #ArmsDownNZ hashtag, which was tweeted thousands of times following the murder of George Floyd.

Healthcare workers were among those voicing concerns. Chris Poynter wrote: “I am an Intensive Care Specialist and have only dealt with a handful of gunshot wounds in 15 years in NZ ICUs. Why would we want to change that now?”

Psychologist Samuel Clack tweeted: “Police brutality is a mental health issue too. People with serious mental illness are 16x more likely to be killed by the police. Police are frequently the first point of contact for vulnerable people in distress. We need to protect our communities.”

Commissioner Coster told *Stuff* the ARTs were scrapped because “it’s been clear to me that there has not been acceptance of this as an appropriate style of policing in New Zealand.” Police had received 4,000 letters in the last week alone opposing the units.

The working class should be warned: the backdown over the ARTs does not signal an end to the militarisation of the police. With an election coming up in September, the governing coalition of Labour, the Greens and NZ First, apparently thought it politically unwise to introduce armed units *at this point*, amid the worldwide outrage over police violence.

In an open letter to Coster, Green Party co-leader Marama Davidson and justice spokesperson Golriz Ghahraman said the ARTs could lead to “dangerous, military-style policing,” which would impact “low socio-economic and predominantly brown communities.”

The government, however, has already significantly strengthened the police, as well as the military and intelligence agencies. An extra 1,800 front-line officers have been recruited, and police training programs in

schools have been expanded.

Police Minister Stuart Nash has insisted that decisions about whether police should carry guns are “operational matters,” which do not require any special authorisation from the government. This means the Police Commissioner can still order a general arming at any time.

Coster told Radio NZ on June 10 that he was considering giving officers rubber bullets. These have been used against peaceful protesters in the US, causing serious injuries.

The New Zealand state clearly anticipates a similar eruption of mass protests, as well as strikes in opposition to rapidly increasing unemployment, poverty and inequality. To prop up capitalism, the ruling elite is preparing to forcibly suppress such a movement of the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact