

New Zealand boosts preparations to join US war against China

Tom Peters
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New Zealand's Labour Party-led government, like its neighbour in Australia, is ramping up military spending and recruitment as part of the US-led preparations for war against China, which have accelerated in response to the global economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The US ruling class is determined that the war drive will be the means to reverse its economic decline and to divert working class opposition to unprecedented levels of social inequality. The Trump administration, backed by the Democrats, views China as the main obstacle to US hegemony, and has enlisted its allies' support in the growing military build-up.

Ministers from the Five Eyes countries—the top-level intelligence-sharing network that includes New Zealand, Australia, the US, Britain and Canada—issued a joint statement on June 24 promising to “advance defence and security cooperation” to defend the “global order that is increasingly being challenged.”

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's government, a coalition between Labour, the Greens and the right-wing nationalist NZ First Party, is committed to spending \$20 billion on military upgrades.

This money is being diverted to the military during the worst economic and social crisis since the Great Depression and at the expense of the working class. Unemployment is expected to exceed 10 percent and nothing is being done to stop hundreds of thousands of people being plunged into poverty. The healthcare system is starved of resources, leaving the country highly vulnerable in the event of another outbreak of COVID-19.

On June 26, the NZ Navy received its new fleet tanker, the Aotearoa, purpose-built for \$500 million by South Korea's Hyundai Heavy Industries. The Aotearoa is the biggest ship ever to serve in the Navy

and can operate in the Pacific and the Antarctic.

On July 8, Defence Minister Ron Mark, a member of NZ First, announced the purchase of 43 new Australian-designed armoured vehicles for the army. *Stuff* noted that the Bushmaster vehicles are already used by the elite NZ Special Air Service (SAS) and other members of the Five Eyes.

The number of regular soldiers in the NZ army is to increase from 4,500 to 6,000 by 2030. The Defence Force has already reported a 21 percent increase in applications to enlist between March and May, compared with the same period last year, fuelled by heavy job losses among young people.

Significantly, Mark praised the \$270 billion military spending program announced by Australia's government this month that includes new long-range missiles. Prime Minister Scott Morrison has made clear it is aimed at preparing for war against China.

Morrison told the media tensions between the US and China meant the world was in a dangerous period comparable to the 1930s and 1940s, i.e. the Second World War. He emphasised that “all of our defence force and defence strategy is built on the alliance... with the United States.”

Defence Minister Mark solidarised New Zealand with this strategy, telling *Stuff*: “What is good for Australia and the defence of Australia is ultimately good for New Zealand.” Canberra, he said, had shown “a clear commitment... to the defence of not just its own interests, but also to our Pacific partners, and a full realisation of the range of challenges that we're all facing.”

Mark added that he was “very pleased that the door is wide open to New Zealand defence industry players to tender” for Australian military contracts.

The statements by Mark and Morrison expose the NZ

government's fraudulent "humanitarian" pretexts for military spending, including claims by the Green Party that new warships, planes and other military hardware are needed to provide relief in climate change-related disasters.

In reality, New Zealand's ruling elite is preparing to join what would be a catastrophic war involving nuclear-armed powers. It has strengthened the alliance with US imperialism, including by joining the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, in exchange for Washington supporting New Zealand's neo-colonial activities in the South Pacific.

In 2018, the Ardern government backed the US in labelling China and Russia the biggest "threats" to global stability. It has also called on Washington to send more military forces to the Pacific, to push back against China's economic and diplomatic presence.

Sections of the media and academia, including supporters of Labour and NZ First, have for years sought to create a climate for war by stoking anti-Chinese sentiment.

These efforts have been ramped up in recent weeks, with renewed attacks on Chinese-born opposition National Party MP Jian Yang. Under intense pressure, Yang announced on Friday that he will retire from politics after the September election, after previously saying he would stand.

Jamil Anderlini, *Financial Times* Asia editor, asserted to TVNZ on June 28 that Yang was part of "the extension of Chinese power into New Zealand." This echoes claims made by pro-US academic Anne-Marie Brady, without any evidence, that Yang is a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) agent. The fascist group Action Zealandia has similarly attacked Yang and accused the National Party of treason.

A key role in this campaign was played by the *Daily Blog*, which is supported by Unite and other trade unions. The blog organised a petition calling for Yang to be removed from parliament because, decades ago, he taught English at a Chinese military intelligence training academy.

Editor Martyn Bradbury wrote on July 7 that the National Party was "a front for Chinese business interests" and a danger to "national security." Referring to party leader Todd Muller as "Beijing Muller," Bradbury dismissed his statements that Yang left the CCP 26 years ago and is a loyal NZ citizen.

Daily Blog, reflecting the nationalism of the trade union bureaucracy, advocates turning New Zealand into a "fortress" with a large military and a ban on immigration.

The National Party represents sections of the bourgeoisie that support the alliance with Washington but remain nervous about the economic impact of alienating China, New Zealand's largest trading partner. On the other hand, Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters, leader of NZ First and also foreign minister, has called for New Zealand to reduce its "reliance" on trade with China.

Peters announced on July 9 that New Zealand will join the other Five Eyes countries in "reviewing" its engagement with Hong Kong following Beijing's imposition of a repressive "national security" law.

The bloc of NZ First, which has a long history of promoting anti-Asian xenophobia, with the Labour Party, the Greens and the trade unions, is based on the support of all these organisations for New Zealand imperialism. The wealth of the bourgeois and upper middle class layers they represent depends, in the final analysis, on the military alliance and financial ties with the US and Australia.



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