

New Zealand to legalise euthanasia following referendum

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New Zealand will become the seventh country in the world to legalise euthanasia after voters in a referendum backed the right of terminally ill people to choose to die. While an estimated 480,000 special votes are still being counted, the margin of support, 65.2 percent to 33.8 percent against, means the outcome is decided.

The vote was one of two referenda conducted alongside the October 17 general election. The second, on whether to legalise recreational cannabis use, failed with 46.1 percent in favour and 53.1 against. It is possible, but unlikely, that this result could change when additional special votes (including people who registered late) are announced on November 6.

Following the election, a Labour-Green Party government has been installed with a substantial parliamentary majority. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern confirmed she had voted “yes” on both referendum questions and that her government will progress the euthanasia legislation “in line with the will of the people.”

Attempts to legislate for euthanasia in 1995 and 2003 failed to get through parliament. Last year, the End of Life Choice Act was passed with 70 votes in favour and 50 against, with MPs voting on a “conscience” basis rather than on party lines. The referendum to ratify it was insisted upon by then Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters, leader of the right-wing NZ First Party in the Labour-led coalition government, which also included the Greens.

The Act outlines criteria for those who can apply to end their life, including they be aged 18 or over, are New Zealand citizens and are suffering from a terminal illness that will end their life within six months. They must “have a significant and ongoing decline in physical capability,” be “enduring unbearable suffering

that cannot be eased” and be able to make an “informed decision” about their death.

People suffering mental illness or decline would not be eligible, nor would those applying solely on the basis of “advanced age” or a disability. Two doctors would have to sign off on the decision, with a psychiatrist called in if either doctor had any doubts.

While the result of the euthanasia referendum is binding, the cannabis vote was not, meaning the government would still have had to pass policy through parliament. The cannabis referendum was part of the Greens’ coalition arrangement with Labour following the 2017 election. The Green Party largely led the pro-legalisation campaign.

Both measures were falsely presented by their supporters as “progressive” initiatives. The referenda, like the general election, were conducted under conditions of an unprecedented global capitalist crisis in which the COVID-19 pandemic is accelerating a brutal attack on the jobs, living standards and social conditions of working people everywhere.

The move to legalise cannabis was partly an attempt by the Greens and their supporters to distract the unfolding social and economic crisis, as well as a means of increasing the vote among layers of the middle class. If passed, the legislation would create lucrative opportunities for “entrepreneurs” to profit from a healthcare crisis exacerbated by the widespread use of cannabis. The creation of a legal drugs market would not, as its proponents claimed, lessen deepening authoritarian state measures, including Labour’s build-up of the police and the victimisation of working class youth.

ACT party leader David Seymour, who sponsored the euthanasia bill, declared New Zealand had fallen “decades” behind the most “progressive” countries in

the world. “I think it’s time New Zealand moved towards being a more compassionate and tolerant society,” Seymour told *the Guardian*. He promoted the euthanasia bill as a matter of “freedom of choice.”

The legalisation of euthanasia is being advanced precisely as ruling elites are using the COVID-19 crisis to advance the conception that the elderly and vulnerable should be sacrificed, including through the criminal policy of “herd immunity.” They are deemed to be no longer useful for generating profits for big business and are accused of cornering an unfair proportion of health funding.

Against a background of widespread poverty among the elderly, the increasing erosion and privatisation of healthcare and deepening austerity measures, including talk of slashing aged pensions, many people feel under pressure to take their lives because they lack financial and psychological resources or social support. In response to the social crisis, New Zealand’s number of suicides in the first six months of 2019 was 685, the highest since records began.

Despite its success at the referendum, which prompted a high-profile celebratory event at parliament, the euthanasia bill was opposed by many doctors. Chris Ford, from the Disabled Persons Assembly, told Radio NZ that the consequences of the vote were “feared.” A disproportionate number of disabled people and those with non-terminal health conditions could opt for voluntary euthanasia in response to not getting the support they need to live fulfilling lives.

As elsewhere, the pandemic is sharply exposing the systemic under-funding of New Zealand’s public health system, which has left it unprepared for any major outbreak. The country’s 20 District Health Boards are all millions of dollars in the red and struggling to provide basic services. Medical specialists warned this week that there is “little sign” a recent one-off financial boost to fight COVID-19 will fix underfunded public health units.

The profit-driven private aged care system has proved to be a death trap for elderly residents. The Rosewood rest home in Christchurch, which became New Zealand’s deadliest COVID-19 cluster with 12 deaths, was found to have breached its obligations, including cleaning services and emergency provision of personal supplies. St Margaret’s residential aged-care home in

Auckland was similarly overwhelmed by a coronavirus outbreak that saw three people die and many staff infected.

Seymour’s role in championing the euthanasia legislation has seen his political stocks sharply rise. Prominent right-wing radio host Mike Hosking declared him “politician of the year” for 2019. From being ACT’s sole MP after assuming the leadership in 2014, he will head a team of 10 MPs in the new parliament, boosted by votes won from NZ First and the National Party. ACT also gained support from the gun lobby after opposing the Labour government’s gun control legislation following the 2019 Christchurch terrorist massacre.

ACT is deeply reviled in the working class. Established in 1993 by former Labour Party finance minister Roger Douglas, it sought to extend the 1984–90 Labour government’s “unfinished” pro-business restructuring agenda. For many years, ACT only held one parliamentary seat due to a deal with the National Party which directed its supporters in the wealthy Epsom electorate to vote for the ACT candidate. It received a total of just 0.5 percent in the 2017 election, but this time reached 7.9 percent.

With the demise of NZ First—on just 2.7 percent of the vote it will not return to parliament—and a collapse in votes for the conservative National Party, ACT is being championed by some as a new right-wing “opposition.” The policies it advocates attack the bare minimal social conditions of the working class. They include massive tax cuts for the wealthy, slashing government expenditure, extending privatisation in health and education and a 3-year freeze on increases to the minimum wage.

The legalisation of assisted suicide is testimony to the mounting social crisis in country after country. ACT’s history and program prove that it has played a central role in creating the very conditions that force people to consider it a viable solution. The embrace of euthanasia by Labour and the Greens is a signal that the entire ruling elite is turning towards this reactionary agenda.



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