

Protest over appalling conditions in New Zealand prison

Tom Peters
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On Sunday, following a tense six-day standoff, 16 prisoners involved in protesting appalling conditions at New Zealand's Waikeria Prison surrendered to authorities. Five of the 21 men who started the protest had already given themselves up. The men had climbed onto the roof of a prison block and caused significant damage, including by starting fires. Hundreds of inmates were relocated due to the fires.

Authorities responded with brutal measures. On December 31, three days into the protest, *Newshub* cited an anonymous source who said negotiators from the Corrections Department were “withholding food and water in a bid to starve out” the prisoners—a claim echoed in other media outlets. The same source said prisoners had accused armed officers of trying to “storm them” during the night. Police denied this.

Prisoners were demanding improved conditions at Waikeria, which was built in 1911 in the Otorohanga district, and is one of the most run-down and unsanitary prisons in the country. The protesters alleged that they were being made to wait months for medical treatment and to wear the same dirty clothing also for months. As well, they complained about the poor quality of drinking water.

A manifesto posted on social media by People Against Prisons Aotearoa (PAPA), reportedly issued by the prisoners, also stated: “We have no toilet seats: we eat our kai [food] out of paper bags right next to our open, shared toilets... We are Māori people forced into a European system. Prisons do not work! Prisons have not worked for the generations before!... They keep doing this to our people, and we have had enough! There is no support in prison... no rehabilitation, nothing.”

On Sunday, Corrections Minister Kelvin Davis dismissed these complaints. He threatened that the

police would consider laying charges over the destruction of facilities. Davis told the media that those involved in the stand-off, which he labelled a “riot,” had “never raised any issues prior to this event... It is my view that the underlying reasons for their actions are not what they claim.” He declared that the men “wanted political attention” and vaguely denounced “those who waded into the issue in order to generate headlines” and “embolden” the protesting prisoners.

The Labour Party-led government of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, first elected in 2017, made false promises to reform New Zealand's judicial system, with a focus on rehabilitation, reducing overcrowding and improving other inhumane conditions.

Waikeria exemplifies the brutal situation that exists throughout the prison system. A report issued by Ombudsman Peter Boshier, in August 2020, noted that two-thirds of Waikeria's population were Māori. Indigenous people make up around 15 percent of New Zealanders, but they are far more likely to be incarcerated. The majority of Māori are among the most exploited layers of the working class.

Boshier found that most men in the prison's high security complex (HSC) “were double-bunked in cells originally designed for one, and living conditions were poor... The provision and quality of clothing and bedding was problematic across both complexes.” Direct segregation cells, used to isolate prisoners from the rest of the prison population, “were run down... Windows did not have curtains and toilets did not have lids,” and ventilation was poor. Boshier concluded that the “HSC environment is not fit for purpose and is impacting adversely on the treatment of t̄ne [men].”

Family members of the Waikeria protesters denied claims by Davis and his department that prisoners had not tried to complain before staging the protest. A

statement quoted in the media said: “Our loved ones inside also tried many times to make complaints, but were denied access to PC01 complaint forms.” They said the jail was “unfit for humans to live in... the jail was unhygienic and conditions inside were disgusting.” PC01 forms are the only means for prisoners to lodge formal complaints.

Waikeria is not an isolated example. On December 14, Ombudsman Boshier released a damning report on a surprise inspection of Auckland’s Paremoremo Prison earlier in 2020. Inspectors found that maximum security prisoners were spending 22-23 hours confined to their cells. Boshier also viewed footage of prison officers using pepper spray on an inmate, which amounts to “cruel treatment” under the Convention against Torture.

The construction of a new maximum-security facility, opened in 2018, had not changed the culture, Boshier said, despite government claims that it would focus more on “rehabilitation and reintegration.” According to the Corrections Department, more than 90 percent of prisoners had mental health or substance abuse issues, but treatment is largely unavailable.

A previous report, released in August 2019, found degrading and severely overcrowded conditions at Ngawha Prison in Northland, which mostly housed low-security prisoners. The prison was opened with much fanfare in 2005, with a stated aim of operating based on “Māori values” focusing on rehabilitation. Among other findings, the Ombudsman noted insufficient access to drinking water and a lack of toilets, which forced prisoners to urinate and defecate in the compound.

The Labour Party campaigned in 2017 on a platform of reducing the overall prison population by 30 percent over 15 years, and lowering the proportion of Māori in prisons to the same level as in the general population, through various “cultural” programs, based on race or national identity. The most recent figures show that in September 2020 there were a total of 9,078 prisoners, down from 10,470 three years earlier, a drop of just 13.29 percent and still above the 8,700 prisoners in 2014. The government is clearly anticipating a resurgence in the prison population, since it has recruited an extra 1,200 police officers, and in 2019 allocated \$406 million to build 976 new prison beds.

Māori Party co-leader Rawiri Waititi played a role in

negotiating the end of the Waikeria stand-off, after the protesters demanded to speak with him. Waititi was highly praised by PAPA, which is linked with the pseudo-left group Organise Aotearoa.

The Māori Party is a right-wing party. It was part of the 2008-2017 National Party-led government and has campaigned for Māori-run prisons—as part of a parallel, racially segregated justice system. This would not make prisons humane, but would provide significant state funding for contracts for the tribal-affiliated businesses that the Māori Party represents.

Racism undoubtedly plays a role in the over-representation of Māori in prisons and as victims of police brutality. However, the prison system is not a “European” or colonial institution, as the Māori Party and its supporters claim. Prisons are part of the state apparatus that defends capitalism and oppresses the working class as a whole, regardless of race. That is why, amid soaring social inequality and growing anti-capitalist sentiment, due to the economic crisis exacerbated by the pandemic, the Ardern government is boosting the powers of the state—to deal with the inevitable eruption of working-class opposition.



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