New Zealand protest calls for action on climate change

Tom Peters
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About 300 people gathered outside New Zealand's parliament in Wellington on January 26 to demand government action to address catastrophic climate change. The rally was led by groups of high school students but also included university students, teachers and other workers. Organisers foreshadowed further events once the school year begins.

The event was organised by School Strike 4 Climate (SS4C), which held three nationwide school strikes in 2019 as part of international protests. Tens of thousands of people participated in New Zealand, with rallies in September 2019 attracting 170,000 people nationwide. Protests were suspended over the past year due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Even as the refusal of governments to suppress COVID-19 has led to nearly 2.2 million deaths, there are growing warnings that their failure to address man-made global warming is preparing an even greater disaster.

Rutgers University researchers recently found the world is the hottest it has been in at least 12,000 years. The polar ice caps are melting at a record rate, in line with the worst scenario predictions of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Rising seas are already endangering many islands and coastal communities. A paper published this month in *Frontiers in Conservation Science*, warns of a "ghastly future of mass extinction, declining health and climate-disruption upheavals" and "the steady erosion of the fabric of human civilisation."

This crisis requires nothing less than transforming the global economy along socialist lines, taking power out of the hands of corporations, which profit from pollution and control policy-making in every country.

Capitalist governments are completely incapable of taking the necessary action. The recent policy announced by US President Joe Biden, ostensibly aimed at reducing carbon emissions to zero by 2050, does not provide the resources needed to achieve this target, and is crafted to avoid imposing burdens on corporate polluters.

Similarly, New Zealand's Labour Party-led government, which includes the Green Party as a coalition partner, passed the Zero Carbon Act in 2019, which has a target of zero emissions by 2050 but does not require any concrete actions to achieve this. Late last year, the government declared a "climate emergency" and promised to make the public sector carbon-neutral by 2025. Even if achieved, this would only eliminate 7 percent of the country's emissions.

Many young people at Tuesday's protest expressed frustration with government inaction. One placard stated: "Labour: Do something for once."

A young student, Charlotte, told the crowd: "I have felt fear and despair in my heart when I think about my future, because all the science points to the fact that things are going to get pretty bad. But movements like this make me harness that fear and turn it into determination."

School student Nathan linked the climate crisis to social inequality, saying: "Our current system… favours prioritising money and individual advantages over systemic change and improvements to everything. We need to focus on fixing the whole world instead of improving one person's experience at the expense of everyone."

Environmental scientist David Lowe warned protesters not to be fooled by "weasel words" from the government, which he said continued to support "unchecked growth" on a "finite planet."

Kate Jensen, a postgraduate marketing student from Victoria University of Wellington, told the *World*

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Socialist Web Site she had been protesting regularly for action on climate change over the past two years since she "realised it had the potential to end life on earth." Governments throughout the world were talking about the issue but had done little. "There's so much that needs to be done, cutting down emissions to virtually nothing."

While Kate felt that the Labour Party was better than the previous National Party government, she said the Zero Carbon Act "doesn't mean a lot if there's no implementation behind it, and there's really nothing at the moment." Jensen also criticised the Emissions Trading Scheme, describing it as a "money-making scheme" that allows companies to "buy the ability to pollute."

SS4C presented a list of demands to the government, including the urgent phasing out of fossil fuels, electrification of public transport, subsidies for renewable energy, funding for electric vehicle charging stations, government investment in "green infrastructure projects," clean agriculture, and retraining workers for "green jobs."

The group also called on the government to allow people made homeless by climate change to "migrate to New Zealand with dignity," and contribute more aid to Pacific island nations facing rising seas, hurricanes and other disasters.

SS4C organisers, however, are largely young members of the Labour Party and the Greens, and sought to promote illusions in Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's government. The rally's opening speaker said: "The time to act is now. People are suffering. This is not the clean or fair Aotearoa that we are portraying ourselves to be. However, there is still hope, together we can achieve what has been deemed in the past as unachievable."

Green Party co-leaders Marama Davidson and James Shaw, the minister for climate change, were invited to address the rally, along with Labour Party MPs and Stuart Smith from the opposition National Party—all of whom postured as defenders of the environment.

Davidson cynically declared that the Greens wanted an "overall system change" to "make our world a better place." She stated: "Climate justice is about transforming a system that for generations has concentrated power and wealth for short-term profit and gain, and only into the hands of a few."

In fact, social inequality and poverty have continued to soar since the Labour-Greens government first came to power in 2017.

SS4C leaders glorified the government's response to COVID-19, saying it should show the same "can-do Kiwi attitude" in tackling climate change. However, the government's main response to the pandemic was to give tens of billions of dollars to big business and the banks. Meanwhile, working people are suffering from increased unemployment and hunger, and severely unaffordable housing driven by property speculation.

The Greens support so-called environmental businesses, such as the elite private Green School, which received nearly $12 million from the government's COVID-19 handouts thanks to lobbying by the party.

Shaw promoted the government's Climate Change Commission, saying its recommendations due to be released next week "will shape our response for years to come." This is a pro-business body led by Rod Carr, a former chairman of the Reserve Bank and former leader of the Canterbury Chamber of Commerce. The commission's recommendations, like every other government policy, will be completely subordinated to the demands of big business that nothing must impinge on their ability to make profits.

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