School students strike in New Zealand over inaction on climate change

Our reporters
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Thousands of school students walked out of classes to protest throughout New Zealand on April 9 against government inaction on climate change. They were supported by many university students and workers.

More than 1,000 people marched through Queen Street in Auckland, about 4,000 rallied outside parliament in Wellington, and thousands more attended events in Christchurch, Dunedin, Hamilton, New Plymouth, Tauranga, Rotorua and other towns.

It was the first nationwide action led by School Strike 4 Climate (SS4C) since 2019, when hundreds of thousands of New Zealanders joined international protests involving millions of people. The global movement has been disrupted by the coronavirus pandemic over the past year.

There are many studies warning that man-made global warming is leading to a catastrophe. In March, a report by the Australian Academy of Science stated that "the planet is well on the path to devastating climate change" and it was "now virtually impossible" to limit warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels.

The scientists called for a "rapid transition to net zero greenhouse gas emissions" to keep the temperature increase "well below" 2°C. Without such action, they predicted a "global mean surface temperature increase of approximately 3°C or more by mid to late century," leading to mass extinctions and large areas becoming uninhabitable.

Governments are neither willing nor capable of taking the measures needed, which would cut across the profit interests of the handful of companies responsible for most of the world's pollution. The Biden administration is instead using the climate crisis as a justification for military spending in preparation for war against China and Russia. New Zealand's Green Party, which is part of the Labour-led coalition government, has similarly used climate change as a pretext for supporting multi-billion dollar upgrades to the army, navy and air force.

The April 9 protests reflected growing anger that almost nothing has been done to stop soaring carbon emissions. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's government declared a "climate emergency" last year but its Zero Carbon Act is a toothless piece of legislation, which places no actual requirements on businesses to stop polluting.

The government's Climate Change Commission (CCC) has made numerous proposals including incentives for electric vehicles, upgrades to public transport and other measures to reduce emissions by 36 percent in 2035, compared with 2018 levels. Its overriding priority, however, is to protect corporate profits.

The measures adopted so far are a drop in the ocean. The day before the climate strike, Ardern announced a ban on new low- and medium-temperature coal-fired boilers. The ban excludes high-temperature boilers like those used in the steel industry. The government plans to phase out all existing boilers by 2037, in line with CCC recommendations, but the date is so far off that it is basically meaningless.

The government also announced it was distributing $22.88 million to 14 companies to help them invest in renewable energy. The recipients include meat processor AFFCO, McCain Foods and dairy processor Synlait. The meat and dairy industries, NZ's major source of pollution, have not faced any serious requirements to reduce emissions.

One of the most tense protests on Friday took place outside the council building in Christchurch. A protest leader urged Labour Party Mayor Lianne Dalziel to

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"put climate over profit and the future of generations over the fortunes of a few… We both know you are not doing enough."

Dalziel flatly rejected the protesters' demand for an end to construction of the Tarras International Airport, which is funded by the council and the government and aimed at boosting tourism. It would be the third international airport in the South Island, which has a population of 1.1 million.

Seeking to blame individuals for carbon emissions, Dalziel told protesters: "It's the people who jump into cars on their own who are really damaging our environment and not giving us the chance to succeed… the council doesn't hold all the solutions." Her brief speech was repeatedly interrupted with angry chants of: "What do we want? Climate justice! When do we want it? Now!"

In Wellington, several students who spoke at the rally emphasised SS4C's demand that the government "take responsibility for helping our neighbours in the Pacific," including increased immigration options for those made homeless by climate change. New Zealand currently does not accept climate refugees and has one of the lowest refugee intakes in the world.

Island nations like Tuvalu, Kiribati, Fiji, Nauru, Niue, Samoa and Tonga are already threatened by rising sea levels and frequent hurricanes and flooding. The crisis is compounded by deeply entrenched poverty and under-development—a legacy of colonial rule by Britain, Australia and New Zealand.

Like previous climate strikes, the April 9 events had an officially-sanctioned character, with many schools actively encouraging students to take part. The SS4C organisers, some of whom are members of the Greens and the Labour Party, promote the illusion that gains can be made through the Ardern government and without any fight against capitalism.

Green Party co-leader James Shaw, who is the minister for climate change, was invited to address protesters outside parliament. He praised the work by "chief executives of some of our largest companies" to address climate change, without pointing to any evidence of this.

Asked by a protest organiser how the government would help workers "transition from unsustainable industries to more sustainable industries," Shaw replied that the Zero Carbon Act included "a requirement for us to have a just transition plan" so people on low incomes would not be disadvantaged.

Such statements are contradicted by the reality of soaring social inequality under the Ardern government. Over the past year the government has transferred tens of billions of dollars to big business, in the form of subsidies, loans and bailouts. Meanwhile, businesses have seized on the economic crisis as a pretext for ruthless restructuring, sacking tens of thousands of people.

The climate crisis only has one solution: the complete reorganisation of the world's economy along socialist lines. Instead of getting handouts, major polluting corporations must be nationalised and placed under the democratic control of the working class. The trillions of dollars in wealth hoarded by the super-rich, and the billions wasted on militarisation, must be expropriated and used to fund sustainable social infrastructure, repair damaged ecosystems, and put an end to poverty and inequality.

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